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Forward

Hello, and welcome to *Blossom*! Before you begin, I do have a couple of things to say to everyone!

First of all, thank you so much for giving this book a chance! This is the first book I've completed on Wattpad! I love you all so much for giving me your support!

However, I do have some warnings.

One, this is a *draft*. That means there will be grammar/spelling errors and a couple plot holes sprinkled throughout. I am aware of these errors and have fixed them in the full, published e-book version that can be found by clicking on the link on my profile.

Secondly, every chapter beyond 10 is a private chapter, meaning you will have to follow me to read it. This is to help prevent copyright, so I do apologize for the inconvenience.

Thirdly, in this book and this series, there are references to:

-- domestic abuse
-- rape
-- homosexuality
-- genderfluidity
-- homophobia/transphobia

If any of these are things that you cannot read about, I advise you to stop reading here. I will not tolerate any homophobic, transphobic, or pro-rape/pro-abuse comments on my story. Thank you.

Finally, please do not find the need to inform me that I'm infringing on copyright laws by publishing a Warriors fanfiction. My family and I have gone over the rules, and I am *not*. (Sorry, that is a big one.)

That rant and rules aside, I truly hope you love Blossom!

~Ember

Blossom is once again free to read!

Soo

I've reached 500+ followers. Somehow. And really it is all thanks to you all that I've accomplished this! I've read a lot of recent comments with confusion about why certain chapters aren't appearing, etc, and that is due to Wattpad updating and deleting private chapters. This book used to be able to be read to completion by following me, but after this update, the private chapters became drafts and I didn't change anything because I'm lazy.

However, especially since Bloom is being written in full on Wattpad, I have decided it doesn't make a lot of sense to make Blossom unavailable on Wattpad, especially since I understand that quite a few of my readers and unable/unwilling to buy my book on Amazon.

I will warn you that my writing has improved dramatically since writing this book-- in other words, I kind of don't like my writing on this book. I very much recommend that you check out my other works (Clan of Ashes, Crown of Ivy, etc.) but I do feel that Bloom is written better as well. But yeah, don't be alarmed at writing style changes.

I hope you all enjoy this 500-followers present, and have a wonderful day!

~Ember

Allegiances

[This book has been submitted in the Warrior Cat Wattys 2017 in the Action category]

F L O R A C L A N

-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-=-

Healer

Moonblaze- Black she-cat with copper eyes *(Trainee, Sunpaw)*

Trainee Healer

Sunpaw- Grey tom with yellow eyes.

Den of the Female Leaders:

Daisyflower- Tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes

Marigoldflower- Golden she-cat with a whitening muzzle and light green eyes

Poppyflower- Ginger tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Lilyflower- Light grey she-cat with yellow eyes

Roseflower- Black she-cat with copper eyes

Den of the Male Leaders:

Oakbranch- White-and-brown tabby tom with green eyes

Ashbranch- Dark grey tom with yellow eyes

Cedarbranch- Cream-and-light brown tom with green eyes

Pinebranch- Golden tom with orange eyes

Maplebranch- Light brown tom with blue eyes

Den of the Lesser Leaders:

F U L L M E M B E R S

Rowantwig- Dark brown tom with yellow eyes

Birchtwig- Light brown tom with green eyes *(Trainee- Alderpaw)*

Beechtwig- Golden tabby tom with yellow eyes *(Trainee- Elmpaw)*

Heatherblossom- Light brown she-cat with blue eyes

Dandelionblossom- Dark brown tabby she-cat with orange eyes *(Trainee- Orchidpaw)*

Daffodilblossom- Orange-and-black tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes

Lilacblossom- Ginger tabby she-cat with copper eyes *(Trainee- Tulippaw)*

T R A I N E E S

Alderpaw- Dark grey tom with yellow eyes

Elmpaw- Brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Orchidpaw- Black-and-white she-cat with yellow eyes

Tulippaw- White-and-grey she-cat with green eyes

Den of the Hunters and Warriors

F U L L M E M B E R S

(**Hunter**) Deerleg- Brown she-cat with yellow eyes *(Trainee- Quailpaw)*

(**Hunter**) Foxtail- Ginger she-cat with yellow-green eyes

(**Hunter**) Harewing- Brown-and-white tom with copper eyes

(**Hunter**) Shrewtail- Grey-and-black tabby she-cat with orange eyes *(Trainee- Larkpaw)*

(**Hunter**) Moletail- Dark brown tabby tom with green eyes *(Trainee- Thrushpaw)*

(**Hunter**) Ratmuzzle- Dark grey-and-white she-cat with yellow eyes

---

(**Fighter**) Buzzardfang- White tom with green eyes

(**Fighter**) Fishclaw- Light grey tom with yellow eyes *(Trainee- Owlpaw)*

(**Fighter**) Mousefang- Brown tom with orange eyes *(Trainee- Swallowpaw)*

(**Fighter**) Crowclaw- Black-and-white tom with green eyes

(**Fighter**) Starlingclaw- Ginger-and-white she-cat with yellow eyes

T R A I N E E S

Owlpaw- Dark brown tom with yellow eyes

Thrushpaw- White she-cat with amber eyes

Swallowpaw- Golden she-cat with green eyes

Quailpaw- Tortoiseshell she-cat with amber eyes

Larkpaw- Light grey she-cat with copper eyes

Den of Servants

F U L L M E M B E R S

Silverfur- Silver tom with yellow eyes

Yellowfur- Yellow tom with green eyes *(Trainee- Fawnpaw)*

Brownfur- Brown tom with yellow eyes *(Trainee- Orangepaw)*

Tanfur- Light brown she-cat with copper eyes

Whitefur- White tom with one blue eye and one green eye- deaf on blue-eye side

Goldenfur- Golden tabby she-cat with orange eyes *(Trainee- Gingerpaw)*

T R A I N E E S

Fawnpaw- Light brown tabby she-cat with yellow-green eyes

Gingerpaw- Ginger she-cat with amber eyes

Orangepaw- Orange she-cat with yellow eyes

Den of Queens and Kittens

Q U E E N S

Kestrelwing- Light brown she-cat with green eyes, mother of Creamkit, Brownkit and Greykit

Finchfeather- Black-and-grey she-cat with blue eyes, mother of Whitekit, Russetkit and Goldenkit

K I T T E N S (0-12 moons)

Whitekit- White tom with yellow eyes *(8 moons- Tester, Ashbranch.)*

Greykit- Grey tom with yellow eyes *(12 moons- Tester, Oakbranch.)*

Russetkit- Russet tom with green eyes *(8 moons- Tester, Cedarbranch.)*

Goldenkit- Golden tom with blue eyes *(8 moons- Tester, Maplebranch.)*

Creamkit- Cream she-cat with green eyes *(12 moons- Tester, Daisyflower.)*

Brownkit- Brown she-cat with copper eyes *(12 moons- Tester, Poppyflower.)*

Silverkit- Silver tabby she-cat with yellow eyes *(12 moons- Tester, Lilyflower)*

Den of Elders and Disabled

Eaglefoot- Light brown tom with green eyes

Ducktalon- White tom with yellow eyes

Squirreltail- Ginger tabby she-cat with orange eyes

Sprucetwig- Grey-and-white tom with yellow eyes

So, people who read my stories, this is, well, yet another story. Yeah. Number 4. If you don't count spoofs and a book that sits there doing nothing. So this will *not* necessarily be the first thing on my to-do list. I will basically write this if I'm stuck on all other three of my stories.

Oh yeah! I'm not sure I've ever mentioned my priorities list! So, here are my stories in updating/writing/editing order. (I will post this on my profile too.)

1. Illiara (My fantasy book.)

2. Emberblaze's Secret (Currently in editing.)

3. The Orphaned Kits (It's... erm ...not my best writing. I will probably get around to editing it when I'm done fixing Emberblaze's Secret.)

4. This book- Blossom!

So unless you readers REALLY like one of my stories, this is my order of priorities. Yeah.

~Ember

(Note-- the allegiances have been edited)

Prologue

"Tankit against Brownkit!"

This is it.

Tankit stood up, shaking out his fur slightly.

Just another battle.

He shifted slightly and walked forward into the arena, hissing a challenge with humor in his eyes as Brownkit did the same. She flicked her tail and met his eyes, friendly competition burning in them.

Just another fight...

Tankit loved fighting, he really did. There was something about it that was so exhilerating, and it gave him a sense of control. He could protect his siblings. He could protect his Clan.

And, of course, he could protect himself.

"Fight!"

Tankit launched himself at Brownkit, who darted quickly to the side, leaving him to land on empty sand, hissing in disappointment.

He heard the hiss of claws flying past as he ducked and registered that she was behind him. He spun almost instantly to meet her attack, ducking under her claws and launching a blow of his own.

She dodged as well, suddenly leaping forward and trying to trip him with a swipe to his legs. He backed up slightly, but a he felt a trickle of blood run down his legs. He bit back a curse.

He leapt forward to pin the brown she-cat to the ground, and she just barely avoided him, twisting nearly out of the ring as she did

so. She scrambled to her feet, exhausted, and couldn't avoid his next pounce.

His sister was now underneath him, and he prepared for the blow that would knock her senseless. *Claws sheathed,* he reminded himself as his paw lifted and prepared to make contact with her head.

Brownkit twisted underneath him in a desperate attempt to get away, nipping his leg slightly as she did so. He recoiled instinctively, and suddenly she was on top of him triumph in her gaze.

Tankit felt a sharp pain on his neck.

He collapsed suddenly to the ground, feeling his lifeblood pour out and cover the sand he was lying on. His head was turned so he could see his siblings, but he almost wished it wasn't. Their faces swum before him, shock and pain in their expressions.

With a sudden flash of understanding, Tankit realized that that bite was meant to kill him. His sister, inexperienced as she was, must have done it a little off. Instead of severing his spine, she'd punctured his jugular.

His heart was completing the job, pumping all his blood out until he felt his vision start to fade. He heard his brother...oh, poor Greykit...call out for a Healer frantically, and Silverkit just stare at him in absolute horror. Creamkit looked terrified, and Brownkit...Brownkit looked shocked.

"What have I done?" she mewed, staring at him in horror.

"You've killed him..." answered a Tester. Tankit couldn't tell who anymore, his vision and hearing were escaping him. "Be more careful next time..."

He felt his heartbeat slow as it began to run out of blood to pump, and he felt his spirit slip away until he was looking at his own broken body, laying on the ground.

He saw his siblings, their faces morphed into expressions of grief,

terror, and guilt.

He saw the Testers watching with no emotion.

And he saw the forest, unaware of the death that had just taken place.

He felt his spirit start to rise, and the scene began to fade as he was swept to wherever afterlife would take him.

Goodbye, brother, sisters.

I wonder if I'll go to the Sun or Moon, seeing as I wasn't Tested...

I guess I'll see.

And with that, the young Testee vanished to the afterlife, leaving his siblings behind.

So here you go! Here's a prologue to Blossom! Note to new readers: This was not in the original version, but I added it because it seems appropriate. I hope you enjoy it!

The Testing

Silverkit was cowering in the corner of the Waiting Den. She was alone now, her siblings already taken to be tested. She knew that Lilyflower was coming soon for her Testing. And she knew that today was Battle Testing.

Battle Testing. She shivered, then got up and began pacing.

Silverkit hated it. The fighting. The injuries. The *blood*.

Blood. Horrible, red, wet, warm, terrifying--

She cut herself off. *No need to get yourself more worked up than you are already. Just enjoy the moment of peace.*

Silverkit sat back down in the corner of the den, breathing deeply. *In, out. In, out. In--*

"Hello, young Silverkit," mewed LIlyflower politely as she entered the den.

Silverkit bent her head formally, carefully rehearsing the response in her head before she spoke it. "Greetings, Leader of the Flowers."

Lilyflower gave her a nod of approval, indicating that she had gotten the response correct. Silverkit let out a sigh of relief. Her last tries had been incorrect, resulting in many a scratch from an unsheathed claw. *Blood.* She shuddered again. Lilyflower turned back towards the entrance. "Come. It is time for Battle Testing." She began padding out the entrance of the den, pausing to make sure that Silverkit was following.

Lilyflower lead Silverkit to the Battle Testing Area, where her siblings were already waiting in a beautifully straight line. Silverkit took her place beside them, barely concealing her trembling. Lilyflower gave her a nod of approval before walking over to the rest of the Testers.

Oakbranch, Greykit's tester, took a step forward. "For our first round, Creamkit against Greykit." He stepped back and the two siblings stepped forward into the ring drawn in the sand. Creamkit was looking confident and glared at her brother menacingly, teeth bared. Greykit, on the other had, was standing as absolute far away as possible.

Silverkit fought the urge to look away, knowing that would be taken as a sign of cowardice, but the scene reminded her so much of poor Tankit's death...it always had.

"Fight!" Oakbranch's call rang out an interrupted Silverkit's thoughts.

With a growl, Creamkit leapt at Greykit, snarling and clawing at him. Greykit, kicking out with his hind legs, managed to shove her off. With a weak hiss, Greykit launched himself at his sister, batting at her without much conviction. Creamkit suddenly tripped, giving Greykit an excellent opportunity for a killing bite, but he paused at the last second. Creamkit took advantage of his hesitation to pin him to the earth, miming a killing bite.

"And the win goes to Creamkit!" announced Oakbranch, sounding disappointed in his Testee's failure. Silverkit, on the other hand, silently yowled approval of his lack of violence. If only Creamkit were more like that.

"Next round- Silverkit against Brownkit!"

Reluctantly, Silverkit stepped forward, looking at her opponent. Brownkit practically bounced into the ring, looking pleased at her almost guaranteed success.

Silverkit looked at Brownkit, suddenly remembering her with bloodied teeth, standing over the body of Tankit. *Murderer!* hissed Silverkit silently. Sudden conviction struck her from nowhere, instilling her with a bout of courage she had no idea she had.

I have to win. I cannot let this MURDERER simply walk over me.

"Fight!"

With a true hiss, Silverkit jumped towards Brownkit, landing on her squarely as though she had pounced on a mouse. Brownkit yowled in shock, trying in vain to shove Silverkit off of her.

Yes! thought Silverkit triumphantly.

Her unsheathed claws raked down Brownkit's side, causing a screech of pain. Silverkit bared her teeth, but then blood began pouring out unto Silverkit's paw. With a screech, Silverkit leapt back, staring at the blood. The red, sticky liquid pouring out of the wound.

Brownkit looked at her curiously, malice in her eyes, slowly advancing towards her. "What is it, *sister*? Afraid of a little blood?"

Silverkit backed up against to the edge of the circle, not daring to speak.

Brownkit's nose twitched in amusement. "You are, aren't you? Are you afraid of this?" Brownkit suddenly charged forward and clawed Silverkit's leg.

Silverkit stared in disbelief at the blood slowly running down her leg. *Blood...*

Brownkit purred. "What about this?" She leapt forward and clamped her teeth on Silverkit's tail. "Or this?" She ran her claws along Silverkit's back, allowing the blood to flow down on either side. Silverkit was too terrified by the blood to even scream.

Poppyblossom stepped forward. "That is enough! Brownkit, you are the winner!"

Brownkit did not seem to hear her Tester, continuing to taunt Silverkit. "Oh! I know you will be afraid of this!" she mewed, staring at her petrified littermate, suddenly lunging forward and clawing her right above the eyes.

Now Silverkit screamed, truly screamed. All she could see was the red, horribly warm liquid she hated and feared with every hair on her pelt. She felt her vision begin to darken as she sank further into fear and pain. Distantly, she heard Poppyflower yelling something

and Brownkit's yells of protest. Then everything went black.

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"Silverkit, dear? Can you hear me?" A voice was right above her, sounding concerned.

Silverkit attempted to say she could, but all that came out was a weak mew.

"That's good," replied the voice. "Would you try to open your eyes for me, please?"

With quite some effort, Silverkit managed to open her eyes to see a cat leaning over her, looking relieved. "A whisker lower and she would've gotten your eyes," she mewed.

"Wh-who are you?" asked Silverkit.

The cat's nose twitched in amusement. "Haven't you seen me before? I'm Moonblaze."

Silverkit wanted to sink into the earth itself. "Oh. Of course." How could she had forgotten who the Healer was?

Moonblaze purred. "It's alright. You've lost a lot of blood, I'd be surprised if you recognized me. Besides, I think you tend to avoid me." Her mew held no accusation, just a bit of amusement.

SIlverkit felt even more embarrassed, despite Moonblaze's tone. She always *did* avoid the Healer's den. Too much blood...

Blood! Suddenly, Silverkit remembered why she was here. She looked down at her pelt quickly, only to see that it had been cleaned. She breathed a sigh of relief. She did *not* want to lick any of that stuff off her paws or fur.

Moonblaze seemed to notice her relief at having her pelt clean, "Yes, your littermate-- Graypaw, I believe-- came with some wet moss and cleaned your pelt for you." Her whiskers twitched. "At least your fear of blood won't matter too much longer." She leaned closer and mewed, "I heard that you will become apprentices

tomorrow."

Graypaw did that for me? thought Silverkit. *That's very nice of him. Wait. One day?* "How long have I been unconscious for?" she asked, worried, her body tense.

Moonblaze quickly padded over and gently pushed her back down. "Not long, dear. Only long enough for one hunting patrol to leave and come back." Silverkit's body relaxed. Only one patrol. If she had been out for too long, she was sure that Lilyflower would punish her.

Another thought struck Silverkit. "What happened to Brownkit?"

Moonblaze looked at Silverkit, then around the empty den nervously. "She is to be--" She gulped. "--exiled for ignoring a Leader of the Flowers." She paused, then looked at Silverkit urgently. "Please don't tell anyone this. You are not supposed to know until it is announced to the Clan. Only the Leaders, Sunpaw and I know. I doubt *Brownkit* even knows. I really shouldn't have told you."

Silverkit bobbed her head, wincing as it stretched the long cut along her spine. "I won't tell," she promised. "Am I allowed to get up?"

Moonblaze nodded. "That is fine."

Silverkit got up from the rock floor of the den, stretching her tired muscles. She winced as her muscles screamed a protest-- she'd pushed herself farther than normal this last fight, and clearly she wasn't quite okay. But she had to push through it, and she stretched carefully, feeling the pain slowly seep out of her limbs.

There. Silverkit flicked her tail, then tested her paws. She poked her head out of the den just in time to hear Marigoldflower's call. "All cats old enough to serve meet under the Great Tree!"

The Exiling

Silverkit stepped out of the den, wincing every time her long back wound was stretched. She sat down underneath the Great Tree, its ten limbs each occupied by a leader. The grey kitten was struck with a sense of awe. Each limb seemed to be as wide as a single oak tree, and each branch was bursting with leaves and flowers. It was *beautiful*.

Silverkit tore her gaze away from the tree, letting her gaze rake across the cats surrounding her. Her body tensed in astonishment, her fur spiking out. FloraClan was *huge*! And noisy! There were so many cats, all mewing at once.

Deep breaths, Silverkit. Deep breaths.

For so long, the only cats she had seen were her mother, the Healers and their Testers, as the Testees were kept apart from the other cats. She spotted Moonblaze beside Sunpaw, who gave her a reassuring nod.

Marigoldflower let out a mew. "Quiet!" She paused as she waited for the Clan subside. Her gaze flicked over the few still-mewing cats, and they instantly quieted at the look in the Leader's eyes. Now certain that she had the Clan's attention, Marigoldflower continued. "Today, we have come to witness the trial of a cat that has broken FloraClan's most sacred rules. Brownkit, step forward."

Brownkit did so, trembling. Despite her courage and malice when pitted against other kits, no sane cat would be calm or confident when confronted by all ten leaders.

"Brownkit, you have attempted to kill a cat in your Testing, taunting her with something you knew she feared," Her gaze flicked to Silverkit briefly, lingering on the wad of cobwebs on her forehead, then her glare returned, harsher than before. "You have succeeded in killing Tankit, son of Kestrelwing, in a bloody match

of Battle Testing," she spat so vehemently the statement almost ended in a hiss.

There were gasps of astonishment from almost every cat. The kittens in Testing were always kept in isolation from the rest of the Clan to ensure that no cat was given advice, meaning that most of FloraClan had no idea Tankit existed, but the simple idea of the killing of your own littermate was simply barbaric. The outrage in the Clan was rising as cats began to chant, "Murderer! Murderer! Murderer!"

Marigoldflower raised her voice, looking down at the terrified Brownkit. "And you have dared to defy a Leader of the Flowers! Not *any* Leader of the Flowers, but your own Tester, ignoring her *direct* order to stop." All ten leaders stood up, baring their teeth. Brownkit sunk even lower to the ground, her brown pelt touching the soil and her body tense.

The Clan below began to hiss in outrage, their chant rising in volume. "MURDERER! MURDERER! MURDERER!"

Marigoldflower flicked her tail, and the other Leaders joined in, their voices raising in volume. "The punishment for this is death! But FloraClan is merciful! *Your punishment shall be exile!*"

FloraClan yowled its approval. "EXILE! EXILE! EXILE! EXILE! EXILE!"

"No! No!" yowled Brownkit, pure terror in her copper eyes. "No! Please! *Anything* but exile! Kill me instead!"

The Leaders ignored the kit's pleas as the Clan's chants rose in excitement and volume. Together, they continued: "From the moment that this cat leaves our territory, she will never again be welcomed into FloraClan's borders. From this moment on, she is an enemy to us, and will receive such treatment. If she dares to set foot in this territory, mewling for food or shelter, she shall only receive a long and torturous death! Buzzardfang, take her away."

Buzzardfang stood up from his place among the crowd, his green eyes blazing with fury towards the young testee. He bared his teeth

as he slowly advanced toward Brownkit, who shrank away in fear.

FloraClan yowled in furious satisfaction at Brownkit's punishment. "MURDERER! MURDERER! MURDERER!"

"NO! PLEASE!" yowled Brownkit as Buzzardfang roughly grabbed her scruff and she was dragged toward the camp exit and she feebly tried to attack him. "No! It was an accident! No!" Her mews faded away as she was was pulled out of the camp.

The Clan's eyes were ablaze with satisfaction as their chanting ceased. A murderer had been rightfully punished in their eyes, but--

Silverkit remembered Brownkit's terrified expression as she was dragged off, not sure whether she was satisfied with Brownkit's exile. On one paw, exile was a horrible fate, as there was almost nothing outside of the Clan's borders, mostly marshy swamps with no squirrels or mice. Death was kinder...

But on the other paw, Brownkit had killed her best friend and littermate, and almost Silverkit herself. The silver tabby felt torn.

Unbidden, the memory of blood cascading down her face suddenly returned along with the taunting voice, and her feelings of sympathy for Brownkit evaporated. *That fox-heart got what she deserved!* she thought fiercely. *Killing Tankit and making me* bleed...

Poppyflower stood up from her place on the tree, "On brighter notes, two young trainees are now ready to become full members of the Den of Hunters and Warriors. Larkpaw and Owlpaw, step forward."

The two trainees quickly stepped forward as Daisyflower and Cedarbranch gracefully leapt down from their places in the Great Tree.

Daisyflower placed her paw on Larkpaw's light grey head as she intoned: "Oh, Sun and Moon, the givers of light and life, look down upon me to approve my choice. Larkpaw, you have proved an excellent contributor to the Den of Hunters and Warriors. Your excellent stalking and leaping skills are held in the highest regard

by every member of FloraClan. Shrewfoot, is your trainee Larkpaw prepared to take on the role of a full member of the Den of Hunters and Warriors?"

Shrewtail inclined her grey and black head. "She is ready, Leader of the Flowers."

"Then by the power granted to me by my position, I give you your name. Larkpaw, from this moment on, your name shall be Larkfoot, in honor of your silence of feet and the power of you leaps. The Den of Hunters and Warriors welcomes you as a full member."

Cedarbranch then placed his paw on Owlpaw's head and recited the words of the ceremony. "Oh, Sun and Moon, the givers of light and life, look down upon me to approve my choice. Owlpaw, you have proved an excellent contributor to the Den of Hunters and Warriors. Your excellent planning and fighting skills are held in the highest regard by every member of FloraClan. Fishclaw, is your trainee Owlpaw prepared to take on the role of a full member of the Den of Hunters and Warriors?"

Fishclaw flicked his tail in approval. "He is, Leader of the Trees."

"Then by the power granted to me by my position, I give you your name. Owlpaw, from this moment on, your name shall be Owltalon, in honor of your swiftness of your attacks and the shrewd planning as of an eagle. The Den of Hunters and Warriors welcomes you as a full member."

As the two leaders leapt back up to their places on the Great Tree, Roseflower raised tail, reminding the Clan not to call their names yet. "As is the custom, tonight you will stand guard to the Den of the Lesser Leaders. I am sure that they will sleep safer knowing you are guarding them." Roseflower settled back down in her place as the yowling began.

"Larkfoot! Owltalon! Larkfoot! Owltalon!" FloraClan's mews rang out through the camp.

As Silverkit joined in, trying to forget everything that had happened today, she suddenly recalled what Moonblaze had told her.

Tomorrow it will be my name being called...

Well, hi (probably two) readers! Another chapter? Crazy, right? Unfortunately, that's how I roll. Chapters 1, 2, 3, wait.....now what?

So yeah, don't always expect everyday updates, but I'm currently feeling very accomplished! Yay!

So, what do you think of FloraClan? And Brownkit's exile? Is it a good/bad idea?

Hope to possibly see your answers!

~Ember

The Naming

As the Moon dipped its head at the return of the Sun, Silverkit lay and watched on the moss of the healer's den. Her mind was teeming with the memories of her kithood- Tankit, Kestrelwing, Creamkit excelling in Leadership, her first catch-- as she fully realized that she and her siblings were to become Trainees today. Just her, Creamkit, and Greykit. Her sleep had been broken as she tried to grasp this fact. *Brownkit is gone.*

She was so deep in thought, in fact, that she did not hear the pawsteps approach. A tentative tail prodded her side, jerking back when its owner realized it had poked one of her wounds. "Sorry, Silverkit. Are you awake?" There was the sound of paws scuffling on the floor of the den, and some quiet mumblings. "Of course she is now. I hurt her. Oh, she'll hate me now..."

The grey she-cat felt a purr rising in her throat. She knew that self-deprecating attitude well. "Hello, Greykit. It's alright. I was already awake. Why are you here? Only the dawn patrol is awake now." *And me,* she added silently.

Greykit sat down and curled his tail around his paws. "It's the Naming," he admitted. "I just couldn't sleep. I've done so bad in Testing, there's no way I'm going anywhere other than the Servant's Den."

Silverkit flicked her tail and purred weakly, remembering the horrors of Battle Testing. "I didn't do much better," she mewed.

"We're pretty even on fighting," Greykit allowed, "but your hunting skill are superb."

"They're not--" Silverkit began.

"Don't be a mousebrain. You come back with at least one piece of freshkill practically every time we hunt."

Silverkit licked her chest fur in embarrassment. "I suppose that's true, but I'm nowhere near Creamkit's level in Battle and Leadership."

"You're still going to be a hunter," Greykit mewed. "I just came here to ask...well, when I'm a servant, will you still talk to me?"

"Of course! Is that even a question?"

Greykit purred in relief. "I suppose not, but I still had to ask."

Silverkit purred as well. "How did you get here, anyway? I thought the kits were supposed to stay on the other side of the river."

Greykit ducked his head. "I snuck out."

"Without being caught?"

Greykit looked away. "Well, a Fighter saw me, but I just told him I was going to see my litttermate. He seemed fine with that."

"Well, I'm glad--"

She cut off her mew as the litttermates heard a mew from outside the den. "All cats old enough to serve meet under the Great Tree!"

It's time already? thought Silverkit incredulously. She and Greykit must have been talking for longer than she thought.

"I guess it's time," Greykit mewed, turning to look at her. A flash of doubt clouded his eyes. "*Are* you becoming a Trainee today? You're still injured." His gaze lingered on the cut above her eyes, which had healed enough to not need cobwebs.

Silverkit bobbed her head. "I am. Moonblaze says I'm healed enough...but I shouldn't do anything too stressful." She breathed deeply through her nose. *You can do this. Nothing bad will happen. It's just the Naming Ceremony. No blood there...I think.*

"Let's go, then," mewed Greykit, stepping out of the den.

The light grey soon-to-be-Trainee breathed in once more and

padded out of the den after her brother. *Nothing will happen,* she repeated. She had almost convinced herself, but this was abandoned as she saw the Clan waiting under the Great Tree. *There are so many of them...*

As SIlverkit struggled to keep her fur flat, Daisyflower leapt gracefully off the tree and addressed the Clan. "We are gathered here to witness a momentous event. Three Testees are ready for their Naming Ceremonies." She fixed SIlverkit, Greykit, and Creamkit, who she had just noticed was beside her, a serious look. "Do you understand, young ones, that this ceremony will dictate your future- your treatment, your role, and your position in FloraClan society?"

Silverkit ducked her head, feeling sick. She somehow managed to nod, and saw her siblings do the same.

"Then the Ceremony will begin," mewed Daisyflower, taking her place back up on the Great Tree and glancing at Marigoldflower. At her nod, Poppyflower, Roseflower, and Ashbranch leapt down from the Great Tree. Poppyflower stepped towards Creamkit.

"Creamkit, for six moons you have been Tested to determine your abilities and which Rank you should be placed in. Your Tester and the other Leaders have conferred, and we have determined your Rank. Creamkit, do you promise, on the Sun and Moon, to remain faithful to the Den of Leaders unto death, and to serve your elders to the best of your abilities?"

Creamkit inhaled sharply, but Silverkit was sure it was an act. Her ever-confident sister, nervous?"I-I do."

"Then by the powers granted to me by my position, and by the power of the Sun and Moon, your name will be Irispaw. You shall never abandon your Den, and will reside with the Den of Lesser Leaders until death, motherhood, or promotion. Heatherblossom, you are ready to recieve your first Trainee. I trust that you will pass down all you know to her."

Heatherblossom stepped forward and touched noses with her new Trainee, looking elate.

So Creamkit- no, Irispaw, is a Leader, thought Silverkit. *No surprises there...* She turned to see that Roseflower had approached her.

"Silverkit, for six moons you have been Tested to determine your abilities and which Rank you should be placed in. Your Tester and the other Leaders have conferred, and we have determined your Rank. Silverkit, do you promise, on the Sun and Moon, to remain faithful to the Den of Hunters and Warriors unto death, and to serve your elders to the best of your abilities?"

I'm a Hunter! Unless I'm a Warrior...oh, she's waiting for me to reply! "I do."

"Then by the powers granted to me by my position, and by the power of the Sun and Moon, your name will be Robinpaw. You shall never abandon your Den, and will reside with the Den of Hunter and Warriors until death or motherhood. Foxtail, you are ready to receive your second Trainee. I trust that you will pass down all you know to her."

Robinpaw turned nervously as Foxtail stepped out of the crowd. *My mentor...* She stepped forward and they touched noses, Robinpaw's terrified yellow eyes meeting Foxtail's reassuring yellow-green ones. Robinpaw felt a little better. *I'm not her first trainee, so she has experience. And Foxtail seems nice...unlike some of my littermates.* Her head snapped around as she remembered that Greykit's Rank still had to be determined. Sure enough, Ashbranch had stepped forward and begun reciting the words.

"Greykit, for six moons you have been Tested to determine your abilities and which Rank you should be placed in. Your Tester and the other Leaders have conferred, and we have determined your Rank. Greykit, do you promise, on the Sun and Moon, to remain faithful to the Den of Servants unto death, and to serve your elders to the best of your abilities?"

Robinpaw ducked her head sadly. He *was* a servant. She quickly looked back up. *It's fine. Greykit was* expecting *this role. I shouldn't feel sad for him.* Her tail drooped. *Though I hoped...*

"I do," mewed Greykit with no hesitation.

"Then by the powers granted to me by my position, and by the power of the Sun and Moon, your name will be Graypaw. You shall never abandon your Den, and will reside with the Den of Hunter and Warriors until death." The dark grey tom turned to the rest of the Clan, searching out a cat in the back. "Whitefur, you are ready to receive your second Trainee. I trust that you will pass down all your knowledge of servitude to him."

Whitefur padded forward reluctantly, his different colored eyes glinting with defeat. The two toms touched noses. Graypaw gave a weak purr, and Robinpaw could just hear his mew. "I promise to be the best apprentice that I can."

Whitefur purred as well. "As long as you can serve, you will do well in this Den." He stepped back as Graypaw rejoined his littermates, his walk slightly less stiff.

"Robinpaw! Irispaw! Greypaw!" FloraClan's cries rang out as the new silver apprentice shrank back into Graypaw. *I'm a Hunter,* she reminded herself, standing up a bit taller. *No blood. So all is well...*

The Den of Hunters

"Come on," came the mew of her new mentor, Foxtail. When Robinpaw didn't react, the ginger she-cat tapped her with her tail. "Come meet your denmates."

"Oh, right," mewed Robinpaw. "S-sorry."

Foxtail purred. "It's alright. I'm not as strict as your Testees."

Robinpaw purred as well, feeling relieved as Foxtail led her over to a hole in a large pile of rocks. Padding in, she saw twenty or so nests spaced evenly around the den. At the sound of her entrance, three curious faces- golden, white, and tortoiseshell popped up from the moss, turning to face her.

"Everyone, this is Robinpaw, your new denmate," introduced Foxtail, tapping the silver trainee lightly with her tail.

The tortoiseshell dropped her head back unto the moss. "We know," she muttered quite loudly. "We *were* at her Naming."

The golden she-cat glared at her and hit her with her tail. "Don't be so grumpy," she said to the other trainee. She looked back at Robinpaw. "My name is Swallowpaw, and this grumpy she-cat is Quailpaw. I think she always sleeps with a thorn in her nest."

"Hey, shut it," mewed Quailpaw, lashing her tail and accidentally hitting the white trainee.

"Hey!"

"I'm *so* sorry."

"Ugh." The last trainee turned to Robinpaw. "My name is Thrushpaw." She glanced at her denmate. "She's not *usually* this annoying."

Robinpaw shrugged. "It's fine. Not any worse than my sister, so I'm used to--" Robinpaw stopped, the memory of Brownkit's tortured face swimming back up to the front of her memory. And the blood...the blood... Her thoughts spiraled towards the cause of her fear...Tankit, poor Tankit...

"Tankit against Brownkit."

Silverkit ran her tail against her brother's flank as he walked into the arena. This was so exciting!

"FIGHT!"

The two testees rolled toward each other. Swipe, slice. Swipe, leap, roll. Silverkit nearly cheered in excitement. Her brother was going to win! Tankit was about to hit Brownkit in the head, when Brownkit suddenly spun around and sunk her teeth into his neck. Tankit went limp.

Brownkit backed away in horror. "What's wrong with him? What did I do?"

Poppyflower turned to face her. "You killed him, Brownkit. Be more careful next time."

He was dead? How could this be? But all the blood, all the blood, it meant death*!*

"Hello? Robinpaw? Hey, I love the Sun and Moon, too, but maybe take a break from visiting them and talk to us?" Thrushpaw's worried voice cut through her thoughts.

"Oh, sorry," mewed Robinpaw, embarrassed.

"And she's a mousebrained cat with her head in the clouds as well," whispered Quailpaw to Swallowpaw not too subtly. Swallowpaw proceeded to hit her in the head with her paw, causing Quailpaw to leap up and hiss in outrage. The tortoiseshell trainee leapt at her denmate and they began tussling. Robinpaw stood awkwardly next to Thrushpaw.

After several moments of silence, Thrushpaw suddenly purred. "The mousebrain."

"Who? You?" purred Robinpaw.

"Hey! Of course not. I'm talking about Quailpaw. Attacking a Warrior-- even if they're only a trainee-- is downright...well, mousebrained." She purred again. "We seem to be using that word a lot, don't we?"

Robinpaw purred even harder and opened her muzzle to speak when Swallowpaw's triumphant mew interrupted her. "I win! As usual." The golden she-cat had the tortoiseshell pinned down firmly, and her eyes flashed

"Ugh. Be quiet."

"Well, what did you expect from challenging a *Warrior*?" asked Swallowpaw smugly.

"A Warrior *trainee*," shot back Quailpaw. "There's a difference."

Swallowpaw rolled her eyes. "Just because you're a *little* older than us doesn't make you better than us."

"A little? I'm probably become a full member in a moon!"

"Not with that attitude, you won't."

The trainees turned to see a brown she-cat glaring at Quailpaw. "I was *going* to let you have the day off, but it seems that *some* cats can't handle it. Quailpaw, we're going to perfect your bird hunting."

"But, Deerleg-" Quailpaw froze, her mentor's yellow eyes boring into her. "Whatever you say."

Deerleg strode out of the den purposefully, her strides long and confident. She turned around to see Quailpaw trudging slowly behind, her head ducked. "Hurry up, Quailpaw!"

There was a flash of fear in Quailpaw's amber eyes, and she quickly increased her pace, swiftly disappearing from view.

The brief moment of silence that followed her departure was almost immediately broken by an explosion of purring. Thrushpaw and

Robinpaw turned to face Swallowpaw, their whiskers beginning to twitch. "What is it, Swallowpaw?"

"Just...just...the expression on her face!" Swallowpaw choked out. "It was terror. Pure terror!"

Thrushpaw began to purr as well. "The bravest cat in the den is definitely the most afraid of her mentor!"

"Bravest?" Swallowpaw whipped around and stared at the white-furred trainee.

"Fine, *second* bravest."

"Um..." interrupted Robinpaw, glancing out the exit of the den. "Are *all* the mentors that strict?" *Is Foxtail only being nice because it is my first day?*

"Of course not!" exclaimed Swallowpaw. "She just needs to be strict with her because Quailpaw won't listen to her otherwise."

Robinpaw let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

Thrushpaw shoved her playfully. "Yeah, Foxtail's awesome. She helped me out with my tree hunting once or twice, and she's really nice."

"Oh, good," mewed Robinpaw, her body relaxing. She paused, then glanced outside. *It's getting late,* she thought, peering around the den. "Where do I sleep?"

Swallowpaw gestured to the right side of the den. "That's where the full members sleep, on the other side of that line. So the dens on this side-" She gestured to the left side. "-are fine."

Robinpaw looked down to see a line freshly drawn in the dirt and turned to the left side. She thought for a moment, then realized she had only been told which nests *not* to use. "So, which nest *can* I use?"

Swallowpaw bounded up to hers. "Not this one!" she mewed. She paused, then jabbed her tail at the one next to it. "Not this one

either. It's Quailpaw's."

Thrushpaw rolled her eyes. "She doesn't want to know what nests *not* to use, Swallowpaw." Thrushpaw gestured toward two beds of moss. "Either of those are free."

Robinpaw walked up to one of them and lay down, marveling at its softness. She hadn't slept in moss like this since-- she didn't even know.

She yawned, sitting up in her new nest. "Is Quailpaw always like this?"

"No," mewed Thrushpaw. "Actually, I have no idea why she's acting like this."

Swallowpaw nodded. "She's usually quite nice- unless you insult her."

"Which you never fail to do," pointed out Thrushpaw.

"True," the golden she-cat mewed.

"But she'll probably be nicer in the future?"

"I wouldn't say *nicer*."

"More like less grumpy!"

"Good," replied Robinpaw, settling back down unto the moss and yawning again. "How late is it now?"

Thrushpaw looked out of the den entrance and turned back to Robinpaw. "I'd say about sundown. Probably time to get to sleep."

As if on cue, a sullen Quailpaw stomped into the den and collapsed unto the soft moss of her bed.

Sleep, thought Robinpaw, letting her eyes begin to close. *That sounds good,* she thought, letting the moss envelop her in its softness. "It's so soft..."

"Much better than the dry old moss they give you as testees, am I right?" Swallowpaw's soft mew seemed to come from far away, and Robinpaw barely managed a nod before sleep took her in its waiting arms.

Um, just out of curiosity, I have a couple questions I'm curious about your answers for. Why do you think that Quailpaw is grumpy? What do you think about Tankit? Who is your favorite of the new characters?

I hope you enjoyed this chapter!

~Ember

The First Training Session

"Robinpaw?" the mew of her mentor punched through her sleepy brain. She blinked open her eyes to see Foxtail above her. "Come on, it's time to start hunting."

Robinpaw opened her mouth in a yawn, feeling excitement course through her tired body. *My first day as a real trainee!* she thought. *But what if I'm not good enough? What if I fail?*

"Up, please." Foxtail accompanied the request with a prod with her tail.

Robinpaw sprang to her feet, tiredness forgotten, determined not to disappoint her mentor. "What are we doing today?"

"Well, first we're just going to review what you learned in Testing. I'm sure you did great, seeing that you got this role."

Robinpaw nodded empathetically. *The Hunting Testing is the part of Testing that got me through kithood. After Tankit--well, if hunting hadn't been there, I think I would've gone crazy.*

She looked down at her claws, remembering the blood trickling down them slowly and shook her head ruefully. *As if I'm not crazy already.*

"Robinpaw?"

Robinpaw snapped out of her daze, turning to face her mentor's concerned gaze. "S-sorry," she mewed, hanging her head in submission and preparing for her rebuke.

"How many times do I have to tell you that I'm not like your Tester?" asked Foxtail patiently, nudging her head back up with her tail.

But you are, thought Robinpaw unexpectedly, realizing what it was

the made her fear her kind mentor so much. *You* are *like Lilyflower--your job, your movements, even your voices are similar.*

"Robinpaw!" Foxtail snapped, her tail lashing in annoyance. "Listen, please!"

Robinpaw flinched and took a step back, flattening her ears. *That voice...it's so much like Lilyflower's.*

Foxtail looked guilty at her trainee's reaction, her voice softening. "I am *not* your Tester. Do you understand? I'm not here to test you, but to help you *grow*. Just relax, Robinpaw, and you will grow to be one of the best Hunters FloraClan has ever seen."

*FloraClan...*Robinpaw's mind was flooded with the memories of the Testing again. She felt Brownkit's claws slice open her head again, then the cut along her back. This time, she couldn't stop the shriek of terror that escaped her as she forced herself out of her memories, head in her paws. *If this is FloraClan, then I don't want to live here!*

Foxtail winced and looked at Robinpaw apologetically, stroking her with her tail. "I'm sorry if I scared you."

Still anxious, Robinpaw nodded, opening her muzzle to force out the words that seemed to be frozen in her throat. "I'm not scared." Voiced, the thought seemed to cage her memories briefly, and Robinpaw took a deep breath.

Foxtail studied her worriedly, then flicked her tail in dismissal and nodded. "Okay, then, let's go," mewed the ginger Hunter, leading her trainee out of the den. "We're going to the training ground."

Robinpaw followed her mentor, her previous fear melting into curiosity and excitement. *We're leaving the camp? I've never left the camp before!*

"Excited, are you?" Foxtail paused and purred. "Of course you are. It's your first time out of the camp, isn't it?"

"Yes!" replied Robinpaw, bouncing behind her mentor eagerly. *I'm going to leave the camp!*

Foxtail purred again and led the silver trainee over the log that crossed the river. Robinpaw winced as they passed the Battle Arena--the birthplace of her nightmares--but didn't say anything, simply shutting her eyes briefly.

Robinpaw opened her eyes again, relieved to see that they had passed through the dreaded area, then noticed, with a flash of fear, that she was about to walk right into a tree. She stopped hurriedly to Foxtail's purrs, her fur feeling hot.

"Come on, Robinpaw. The Training area is *this* way."

Robinpaw turned and walked back towards her mentor, her pelt burning in embarrassment.

"It's fine," mewed Foxtail. "Most new Trainees hate that place. I don't blame you for closing your eyes." She lowered her voice. "On my first couple days, I did too."

Robinpaw blinked at her. *Really? This isn't strange at all?* She blinked again, noticing that Foxtail had seemed to have disappeared.

Robinpaw looked around frantically before cocking her head and swiveling her ear to listen for Foxtail. If this was some sort of a test, she was determined not to fail. Silence. She listened harder, sure that her mentor's mew would come any minute.

Sure enough, Foxtail's mew came from a couple foxlengths in front of her. "Come on. The Training Ground is over here." She paused. "And if you're wondering if this is a test, you're right!"

Robinpaw walked slowly towards Foxtail's voice, taking care to avoid the trees and brambles. She came out into the clearing, looking around in surprise at the strangely plant-free area.

"Good job," Foxtail praised.

Robinpaw received the approval with a distracted nod, still studying the clearing. behind and beside her were thick swaths of birch and oak, the ground coated by the thin undergrowth. But in front of her, the Training ground was bereft of any vegetation, bare soil forming an almost perfect circle.

"Where are the plants?" she asked curiously.

Foxtail flicked her tail, an unidentifiable look flashing briefly through her yellow-green eyes. "The Servants," was her only answer.

I should have guessed, she thought, wincing at the thought of cats digging up every plant and filling the holes. *Poor Greypaw...*

"We should probably start *training* now," pointed out the ginger she-cat.

"Right." Robinpaw shook her head to dismiss the thought of her brother from her head. "Let's start."

"Okay," mewed Foxtail, walking to one side of the clearing. "Let's see your hunting crouch."

Obediently, the silver trainee crouched, her tail straight and unmoving. Foxtail walked up and studied her posture attentively. "Head lower," she ordered.

Robinpaw did so, her eyes meeting Foxtail's for approval.

"Hmm, better," she mewed, hooking an old oak stick on her claw and moving it to the opposite side of the clearing. "Okay, let's see you catch that stick."

Robinpaw nodded, beginning to silently creep towards the stick, making sure that the wind was behind her. When she felt she was close enough, the trainee leaped, her front paws landing squarely on the oak. She looked up at Foxtail inquisitively.

"Good job," Foxtail praised. "I see that your Tester has taught you well--who was your Tester, by the way?"

"Lilyflower," mewed Robinpaw, the fierce she-cat's light grey pelt flashing through her memory. She winced as she remembered the blood from her mistakes pouring down and clumping up her fur again, and resisted the temptation to turn around and check if it was there. *It's not real, it's not real,* she chanted silently. *Stay strong, Robinpaw. Stay strong.*

Foxtail nodded in understanding, a flash of a sudden emotion--saddness? longing?--flashing in her eyes. "She's a good one. Would've been a Hunter if she wasn't so good at Leadership."

Robinpaw studied her mentor's expression. *Could Lilyflower be Foxtail's littermate? That would explain why she reminds me so strongly of her.* She shook her head, pushing the thought to the back of her mind. *Oh well, I suppose it would be rude to pry.*

She turned back to her mentor, her expression alert. "What next?" she asked quietly, careful not to disturb any prey.

Foxtail peered around the clearing, and her gaze settled on a small mouse that chose that moment to scamper into the clearing. She pointed her tail at it, and Robinpaw nodded in acknowledgement.

Taking a deep breath, Robinpaw checked her posture, making sure that her head was lower, as Foxtail had instructed her. She eyed the mouse, silently measuring the distance. The silver she-cat took a silent step forward, then another. *One more step,* she thought. *Then I can leap!*

Crack! The mouse scampered off, and Robinpaw lifted up her paw in dismay. She hissed as she saw the broken twig underneath, and lashed her tail. She turned to her mentor apologetically. "Sorry."

"What did you forget?"

Robinpaw licked her chest fur. "I didn't check for any leaves or twigs," she admitted. She hissed in annoyance. "I should have caught it."

"It's fine," mewed Foxtail. "Almost no one catches their prey their first day as a Trainee." Her whiskers twitched. "They're trying too hard to impress their mentors."

Robinpaw ducked her head in embarrassment. *I did try to impress her,* she admitted silently. *I just wanted to show her that I can hunt. I wanted her to be proud...*

Foxtail purred. "It's alright, Robinpaw. We've got all day; I'm sure you'll catch some more."

Robinpaw nodded. She *would* catch more prey. *I will prove that the Leaders chose correctly,* she thought fiercely. *I will be the greatest Hunter FloraClan has ever seen!*

Dedicated to awesomesauceoreos for helping me edit most of this!

Well, um, any thoughts? Questions? Errors? I know this wasn't the most *interesting* chapter, but I hope it showed you more of Foxtail and Robinpaw's personalities. :) Hope you still liked it.

Oh, and you probably noticed I changed the title! Blossom is going to be the first book of an *at least* three book series, so I hope that excites you! :) Also, this has switched to my top priority book (after *Illiara*) because people seem to like this book!

~Ember

(PS: Your comments really do motivate me! Thank you to all of you who have commented!)

The Hunt

Robinpaw trudged into the camp, her muscles screaming. *The Hunting Testing was never this hard! I combed the woods for any prey, and even then I barely would catch it!*

The silver trainee stopped by the freshkill pile and dropped the two mice she'd caught into it, wincing as she saw how tiny they were. *Why am I such a failure?*

As if to prove her statement, Thrushpaw walked into the camp, carrying both a hare and a squirrel. Her eyes lit up as she spotted Robinpaw, but with the squirrel tucked beneath her chin and the hare dangling from her mouth, Thrushpaw could only wave a tail in greeting.

Not only are her catches *impressive, but the fact that she can carry them both! I'm such a failure.* Robinpaw exhaled in defeat and sat down, exhausted, as the white she-cat deposited her prey into the pile and hurried over to her.

"So, how was it?" she inquired, stretching out her back.

Robinpaw sighed. "Horrible."

Thrushpaw turned to face her. "Really? It wasn't Foxtail, was it?"

"No," mewed Robinpaw, flicking her tail in dismissal. "I can't hunt! I had to search FOREVER to find anything, and then I'd leap and miss it! I only got two mice," she finished glumly.

Thrushpaw purred. "You're annoyed because it isn't like the Testing, aren't you? Not as easy?"

Robinpaw nodded. *What is it? Are my muscles weak for sleeping on soft moss? Is that it? Or is--*

"Robinpaw, the Testers sprinkle seeds in the hunting ground there, so prey comes over and eats it. That's what those little circle things on your paws were, remember them?"

Robinpaw *did* remember them. Her fur begin to feel hot as she realized that the prey was always eating that. "Oh." *So I'm* not *a failure?*

"Every trainee needs at least a couple of days to adjust from the easy hunting of Testing. You're not a failure," she added, purring and nudging her playfully.

Robinpaw's body relaxed. *Thank the Sun and Moon...*

"And you caught two mice! I think I went home empty pawed my first day!" purred Thrushpaw.

"Really?" purred the silver she-cat.

Thrushpaw nodded, staring off into the forest as she recalled the time. "Yep! I was concentrating so hard on impressing my mentor, I forgot to keep my tail still. The prey heard me coming every time." She turned back to Robinpaw. "It's great you brought back something. The pile's looking a little low."

Robinpaw turned to look at the pile. *Low?* It seemed to have plenty of prey! "Low?" she repeated.

The white she-cat nodded. "Yeah. Remember, there are only so many hunters. Let's see...Larkfoot, Deerleg, Ratmuzzle, Shrewfoot, Harewing, Moletail, Foxtail, you, Quailpaw, and I." She paused. "Oh, right! And Kestrelwing!" She tilted her head. "Well, sort of. Not right now, you know, she's under suspicion or something, but normally she'd be hunting."

Kestrelwing's face flashed into Robinpaw's memory, and she suppressed a shudder. Her mother's indifference was one of the scariest memories she had...along with her lack of reaction to her son's death.

"Put that way, that seems like a lot. But remember, there are ten Leaders, eleven or twelve Lesser Leaders, seven Fighters, and...oh, I

don't know how many servants. Don't see them much. But that's a *lot* of cats."

Yeah...a lot of cats, agreed Robinpaw. "Why aren't there more hunters?" That genuinely confused Robinpaw. Why wouldn't there be more Hunters and less Lesser Leaders? *They* didn't do anything useful.

Thrushpaw sighed, wrapping her tail around her paws. "There were, but last leaf-bare, two of our hunters got coughs. They went to the healer's den, but before we knew it, they were convulsing on the floor." She shuddered. "I wish I hadn't seen it."

Robinpaw winced.

Thrushpaw shook her head quickly, dispelling the memory. "Anyway, that's why we have to catch more than usual, and even two mice are useful." She paused, purring. "Anything helps."

Robinpaw wrapped her tail around her friend. "Thanks, Thrushpaw. I guess I just really needed to hear that."

The white she-cat purred. "No problem." Her stomach gave a rumble, and she looked towards the prey pile. "Want to share a sparrow? You've definitely earned it, Robinpaw."

With a grateful nod, Robinpaw padded over to the fresh-kill pile and selected a plump sparrow. They began sharing it, both eating it until their stomachs were full.

Thrushpaw's gaze wandered to the Den of Hunters and Warriors. Robinpaw followed her gaze, imagining resting her aching muscles on that wonderful softness.

The silver trainee stood up, turning towards the den, but paused, glancing back at her companion. *Am I allowed to go rest..?*

Thrushpaw purred, standing up as well. "I'm tired too, Robinpaw. No need to feel bad." She led the way towards the den, turning to make sure her friend was following.

Robinpaw hadn't moved; a bit irritated, Thrushpaw walked back

and prodded her gently with her tail. "Come on, Robinpaw," she repeated, padding towards the entrance. Robinpaw followed her obediently, but froze when they reached the hole.

She desperately wanted to go and rest, but her mind was a mess of doubts and insecurities. *Don't we have to hunt more? After all, I only caught two mice...* "Are you sure it's all right?" voiced the light grey she-cat. *I don't want to get into trouble on my first real day as a trainee...*

Thrushpaw flicked her ears at Robinpaw's hesitation. "Really, it'll be fine." She stopped, studying her drooping tail, sagging whiskers, and tired yellow eyes. "Besides, you really need it." Her voice sounded truly concerned.

But you just gave that speech about the prey pile being low...

She held back a sigh. *But she's right...I'm so tired...* She looked up into Thrushpaw's concerned amber eyes before letting her head droop again.

This time, when Thrushpaw spoke, her voice was harsher and more commanding. "Robinpaw, I'm not telling you this again. We're going to rest, okay?" Her voice softened again. "I'm worried. You *don't* want to be tired and clumsy while hunting, ever."

Robinpaw still hesitated.

"We'll hunt more afterward."

Finally nodding, Robinpaw followed Thrushpaw into the den, collapsing onto the moss. *So...soft...* was her last thought before drifting off to sleep.

~----------~

"Robinpaw." A tail poked her leg, a bit harshly. "*Robinpaw*."

"Hmm?" Robinpaw sat up blearily to see Thrushpaw's face above her. "Why'd you wake me up?" *I quite clearly remember she was the one who insisted I sleep...*

"Remember? We were going to go hunting," Thrushpaw reminded her.

"Oh, right. Let's go then."

With Thrushpaw a tail-length behind her, Robinpaw walked towards where she'd hunted earlier, then thought of the Battle Testing area. She shuddered. "Do you know of any other hunting places?"

Thrushpaw nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, I do! Follow me." She began to pad in the opposite direction, away from the river.

Robinpaw followed her gratefully, thankful that she didn't have to pass the Battle Testing area again. A pair of blue eyes surfaced in her memory, but she shoved them down. *I can't think about Tankit now...*

"So, um, where are we going?" asked Robinpaw, if only to break the silence.

"My favorite hunting place!" mewed Thrushpaw excitedly before she seemed to realize that didn't tell Robinpaw much. "It's under one of the biggest trees in our territory, and all the mice and squirrels love it here."

Robinpaw's spirits rose dramatically. *Maybe I can actually catch something!*

Thrushpaw increased her speed, weaving through the rapidly denser forest with ease. Robinpaw could hear the rushing water and realized they must be heading for the stream. Her companion sped up even more, purring.

"Can't catch me!"

Robinpaw purred and ran into the clearing. She immediately understood why her friend liked it so much--the tree was a beautiful birch that rose just a little higher than the rest.

The skittering of tiny paws caused her to cock her head curiously and inhale sharply. The scent of squirrels invaded her nostrils; she

quickly located it, nibbling some sort of nut under the tree. Her tail lifted slightly before she forced it back down, getting into the hunting crouch she'd attempted earlier that day.

Light footsteps...straight tail...watch out for leaves... The silver trainee crept closer and closer to her prey, hardly daring to breathe. She was maybe a fox-length away...a bit less...

Robinpaw leaped as far as her young muscles would take her, propelling her through the air and squarely unto the squirrel. She killed it with a swift bite to the neck before it could squeak a warning and turned back to Thruhpaw, her eyes bright.

"Let's hunt."

Can you believe it? I updated! As you might've known from Feather's comment last chapter, I got a concussion and haven't been able to be on electronics that much--not long enough to write anyway. But finally it's mostly gone! Sorry if it is a bit choppy-- I had finished more than half before my brain injury, so the switch might be a BIT awkward. However, I really hope I'll be able to update more faithfully now!

Question for today-- What do you think of Thrushpaw? Like her? Think she's too nice? Basically, just your opinion on her :)

(Obviously dedicated to Featherfrost_ for informing you all 'bout my injury & helping me come up with this title)

The Raven and the Robin

"Robinpaw? Robinpaw, wake up!"

Thrushpaw's words took a second to penetrate Robinpaw's sleepy mind as she slowly blinked her eyes open. "What is it?"

Thrushpaw let out a sigh of relief. "*Finally*. I thought Quailpaw was going to kill me!"

Robinpaw got up and stretched quickly, staring at her denmate curiously. "Quailpaw?"

"Yeah, we're training with her today," mewed Thrushpaw. "She was so annoyed that I hadn't woken you up yet. I actually thought she was going to attack me."

"I *still* might if you don't get your sorry mouse-brained tails out of there!" Quailpaw's familiar, irritated call came from outside the den. She did not sound excited about this arrangement.

Robinpaw shared a quick glance with Thrushpaw. "She sounds serious."

The white she cat bobbed her head in agreement. "I think she is." By silent agreement, the two she-cats exited the den.

Outside, Robinpaw was greeted by a not-too-friendly tortoiseshell face. "*At last*," Quailpaw mewed, rolling her eyes. "I was beginning to think you'd talk in there until the moon chased the sun across the sky."

"Be nice, Quailpaw," reprimanded Deerleg tiredly. They'd obviously had this conversation before.

Quailpaw flicked her tail in irritation and stopped talking.

"So," mewed Foxtail in the sudden silence, causing Robinpaw to

shift her gaze to her. "We're doing some joint training today. We're all going to do a bit of bird hunting."

Quailpaw groaned. "Again?"

Deerleg turned to face her apprentice. "That's what you'll be doing until you can do it properly, Quailpaw. This is no one's fault but your own."

Even as Quailpaw muttered under her breath, Robinpaw couldn't help agreeing with her. She'd only caught one bird, *ever*, and it was in Testing when there were seeds everywhere. In fact, now she thought about if, she'd caught the *only* bird in their Testing. A robin.

"We're going to follow the river for a while upstream, and we are *only* hunting birds. If a squirrel runs over your talons, ignore it. We'll get those later. Is that understood?" It was a dark brown tabby who spoke this time. Robinpaw assumed it must be Thrushpaw's mentor...Moletail, was it?

"Robinpaw? Do you understand?" Foxtail spoke this time, snapping Robinpaw out of her daze.

The silver trainee felt her fur grow hot as she realized she hadn't nodded with the others. "Yes, Foxtail."

"Good."

Moletail turned to the trainees for a moment then gestured toward the river with his tail. "Well, what are you waiting for? Go hunt!"

~----------~

Robinpaw was stalking through the undergrowth as silently as she could, ears pricked for the slightest chirp of a songbird.

How can it be so hard to find a bird? she wondered. *Surely* some *must live in all these trees!*

But then again, there never was much birdsong in the forest. Perhaps the birds lived farther away from camp...

Caw!

It took all of Robinpaw's willpower not to snap her head toward the cry. Slowly, she turned so she faced the noise, taking extra care not to step on any twigs. Her yellow eyes scanned the trees keenly.

Come on, bird. Make some noise again.

Caw! CAW!

There. Robinpaw locked her eyes on the raven, staring at it with so much attention it felt like she could kill it from there with her eyes.

Caw! The raven looked down at the clearing below him, where a fallen berry lay. He scanned the clearing once, twice, and Robinpaw dared not breathe.

The raven dove down toward the berry, alighting on the ground and pecking at it with quick, jerky movements. Robinpaw crept closer, and when she felt she was close enough, leapt.

CAW!

Robinpaw's paws landed a whisker away from the bird, which immediately alighted and flew back to his perch.

Robinpaw sighed. *Well, I'm sure I'll find more birds. I won't let this failure get me down!*

~----------~

Robinpaw was sore, tired and irritated. If anyone were to talk to her, she'd probably snap at them with a Quailpaw-esque retort. *No wonder she's like that all the time. If she does this every day...*

It was sunhigh, and Robinpaw *still* hadn't caught a single bird. She'd spent ages tracking one, finally gotten close enough, only to pounce too slowly. And she hadn't seen a bird since.

I'm pretty sure there is only ONE bird in all of FloraClan, Robinpaw sighed. *And I already missed it.*

Regardless, Robinpaw kept as silent as possible, glancing below her to make sure her paws didn't snap a twig and her tail didn't brush a branch.

Suddenly-- a flutter of wings; a flash of brown and red.

Robinpaw's ears pricked as the robin darted down unto the ground, snatching up some kind of insect and gulping it down. Robinpaw crept closer...closer...

The tip of Robinpaw's tail brushed the foliage, and the bird jerked its head in her direction. Its wings immediately flashed out at the sight of the silver she-cat and it pushed off the ground.

No! I can't let this one get away!

With the biggest leap that she had ever attempted, Robinpaw launched off the ground at the fleeing robin. One claw snagged the bird, and the silver tabby almost let out a yowl of accomplishment as it faltered and fell to the ground. Padding up to it, she quickly ended its misery with a bite to the neck.

Thank the Sun and Moon. At least I didn't end up with nothing.

She glanced back at the sky. *Do I have time to keep looking..?*

"Robinpaw?"

The cry was faint, but it was definitely there. Picking up her bird and tucking it under her chin, she began walking towards the voice. "Yes?"

Quailpaw padded into view, her stiff walk relaxing slightly as she caught sight of her companion. She looked to tired to even yell at her. Dropping her prey at her feet, the tortoiseshell winced at the soreness of her muscles. "What'd you get?" she asked, gesturing weakly at Robinpaw's catch.

"Just a robin." The silver trainee could feel her fur beginning to burn in embarrassment. She could see at least two birds at Quailpaw's feet, and she once again berated herself for missing that raven.

Quailpaw nodded and picked up her prey carefully, turning away and padding back towards the river. When Robinpaw hesitated, Quailpaw whipped back around. "Come on! Are you just going to stare at me or what? We need to get back to our mentors *now*."

Robinpaw picked up her robin and sighed. Apparently Quailpaw *wasn't* too tired to snap at her.

Hurrying up to match Quailpaw's quick pace, Robinpaw walked next to the other she-cat. She desperately wanted to know whether Quailpaw actually hated her or whether she was just angry at bird hunting, but she couldn't open her mouth. Finally, Quailpaw abruptly stopped moving, dumping her prey on the ground unceremoniously. "What is it? You look like a frog's about to hop right out of your mouth."

Robinpaw stopped as well, setting her bird on the ground carefully before turning to her denmate. *How to phrase this...?*

"Do you hate me?" Robinpaw blurted. *Oh no. I didn't mean to say it all like that; I wanted to make less of an issue out of it and not be so blunt...she's going to be so annoyed.*

To Robinpaw's surprise, instead of replying angrily, her companion exhaled sharply. "No, it has nothing to do with you."

Robinpaw tilted her head slightly in confusion. "Then what..?"

"None of your business!" Quailpaw snapped, snatching up her prey once more. "Come on, we're late already." She began stalking off so quickly that Robinpaw had to run to keep up.

Not long after, Robinpaw caught sight of the river, their mentors waiting patiently by it.

"Robinpaw," greeted Foxtail. "I'm impressed. You actually caught a bird!"

Robinpaw brightened for a moment at the praise, then hung her head as she remebered the raven.

"I missed another one," she mumbled.

Foxtail purred. "It's ok, Robinpaw. It's your first time hunting birds."

"Oh, you caught one! Great job, Robinpaw!" It was Thrushpaw, who had just come out of the woods as well. Setting down her catches carefully, she walked over to Robinpaw and examined her robin. "Nice kill, too. You hooked it out of the air, didn't you?"

Robinpaw licked her chest modestly. "Well, I startled it, and it started to fly away..."

"Still, excellent catch!"

"You did good as well," mewed Moletail, gesturing at the two birds at Thrushpaw's feet.

Thrushpaw flicked her tail in acknowledgement, turning to Quailpaw. "How'd you do?"

"Three," muttered Quailpaw.

Deerleg turned to her apprentice. "Why so gloomy? Those were all excellent catches. I was watching."

"You were?!"

Deerleg ignored Quailpaw's indignation. "Besides, I think you're done with bird hunting now. Won't be long until you're a full member."

Robinpaw repressed a purr as she saw Quailpaw's posture lighten and relax. *She looks like she won't snap at me any second.*

"Come on, Robinpaw! Let's get our catches in the freshkill pile!" Thrushpaw nudged Robinpaw's side with her tail. "Last one there is a frost-ridden frog!"

Purring, Robinpaw picked up her catch and took off after her friend down the river.

Being a Hunter is my dream come true, she thought happily. *I'm glad I live in FloraClan.*

Ember here! Yes, I *finally* posted another chapter! I hope you enjoyed :)

How do you guys like Quailpaw so far? Any guesses on why she's annoyed all the time? (Hint-- there are actually two reasons). I'm also sure some of you picked up a bit of a hint on how Robinpaw got her name ;) Yes, there *was* a reason.

Anyhow, just wanted to say thank you reading this book! 1K reads...never would've thought I'd get there!

Also, extra thanks for those of you who submitted a form! That really means a lot to me :) Every one of those characters will be accepted in some way or form unless I PM you soon.

The Owl and the Quail

That morning, the silver trainee was not woken by the gentle voice of her mentor.

No, today she was woken by a rarity-- the sun and the chattering of the few birds that lived anywhere near the FloraClan camp.

Robinpaw yawned and stretched, a sudden wave of worry shooting through her. *Why* hasn't *Foxtail woken me up?*

"Robinpaw! Quailpaw's going to become a full member today!" The excited voice of Thrushpaw caused the silver she-cat to turn and face her friend.

Wow! How exciting! thought Robinpaw giddily, sleepiness for once not clouding her thoughts. "So, are our training sessions not happening today?"

Thrushpaw nodded enthusiastically. "It's one of the only days we can sleep in and play all day!"

"And talk," mewed a new voice.

Robinpaw turned to face the light grey she-cat, curious. For a moment the hunter was unfamiliar, then something clicked as she recognized her as the cat that had taught her how to properly pounce. "Larkfoot! I haven't spoken to you in moons!"

Larkfoot purred. "Not *moons*, Robinpaw. It hasn't even been two moons yet."

Robinpaw flicked her tail in dismissal. "What does it matter?" She paused, turning and studying the other cats in the den. "Where's Quailpaw?"

"Hunting, I'd imagine," mewed a black-and-white tom gruffly. "Isn't that all you hunters *ever* do?"

Deerleg purred, twining her tail with his. "Now, now. Be nice, Crowclaw. We're the ones feeding you, after all."

"Fine," he muttered, acting offended, but Robinpaw noted that he didn't retract his tail from hers.

"Are the others hunting as well?" asked Robinpaw, looking curiously for her mentor.

Larkfoot nodded. "With less of us hunting than usual, the others have to hunt more." She must have noticed the look of guilt that covered Robinpaw's features, as she quickly added: "The trainees always have the day off, as they're working harder than the rest of us, and everyone else has a rotating schedule."

Robinpaw nodded. "Then why is Quailpaw hunting?"

"It's her last day," Larkfoot explained. "I suppose she wants too. Besides, I'm sure she wants to spend time with my brother."

"Owltalon?" inquired Thrushpaw curiously. "But isn't he a fighter? Why would he be hunting?"

"I'm sure he's there to 'protect' her," Larkfoot explained. "That's what they do." She rolled her eyes. "And of course he would. Haven't you seen the way they look at each other?"

Robinpaw pricked her ears. This was news to her.

"Oh, come on! Has no one else put together that that's why they're both so sulky? They're not allowed to be mates until they're both full members." Larkfoot sounded almost insulted that she was the only one who'd figured it out.

Deerfoot, on the other hand, looked a little doubtful. "Sure. We'll see."

There was a sudden thundering of pawsteps outside the den, and the rest of the hunters and fighters walked in.

Swallowpaw sat down next to Robinpaw and gave her a weary sigh. "Hi."

Robinpaw nodded in greeting, searching the den for Quailpaw. Her gaze locked with Kestrelwing's, and she broke away awkwardly. Turning to Thrushpaw, she prodded her with her tail. "Where's Quailpaw?"

Thrushpaw flicked her tail helplessly. "I don't know."

"All cats old enough to serve meet under the Great Tree!"

Robinpaw and the rest of her den padded toward the Great Tree, where Quailpaw was already waiting, Owltalon beside her. Larkfoot sat down next to her littermate, mewing something the silver she-cat couldn't make out and gesturing towards Quailpaw teasingly.

Robinpaw settled down next to Thrushpaw and Swallowpaw, full of anticipation. Someday *she* would be having this same ceremony. It seemed impossible.

"Thrushpaw," she said softly, "can you believe that we'll have do this someday too?"

Thrushpaw shook her head, purring. "No, I can't."

A grey pelt brushed against her own, stopping and sitting down almost reluctantly. "Robinpaw? C-can I sit here?"

"Greypaw!" exclaimed Robinpaw, recognizing her brother. "Of course!"

Marigoldflower lifted her tail to silence the Clan. "FloraClan gathers here today to witness the ascension of ranks of one cat from trainee to full member. Quailpaw, step forward"

Quailpaw did so obediently, her tail twitching with either excitement or nervousness; Robinpaw wasn't sure.

Roseflower leapt down gracefully from her spot on the tree, stopping in front of Quailpaw. She looked at her with something akin to pride, and Robinpaw wondered curiously if she had been Quailpaw's Tester.

Roseflower placed her paw on Quailpaw's head, closing her eyes to

remember the words. "Oh, Sun and Moon, the givers of light and life, look down upon me to approve my choice. Quailpaw, you have proved an excellent contributor to the Den of Hunters and Warriors. Your excellent fish-catching and patience are held in the highest regard by every member of FloraClan. Deerfoot, is your trainee Quailpaw prepared to take on the role of a full member of the Den of Hunters and Warriors?"

Deerfoot straightened in her place next to Crowclaw. "She is, Leader of the Flowers."

"Then by the power granted to me by my position, I give you your name. Quailpaw, from this moment on, your name shall be Quailwhisker, in honor of your careful planning and infinite patience. The Den of Hunters and Warriors welcomes you as a full member."

Quailwhisker stood high and proud, her eyes sparkling with emotion as the Clan called out her new name, "Quailwhisker! Quailwhisker! Quailwhisker!"

"As is the custom, tonight you will stand guard for the Den of the Lesser Leaders. I am sure that the Lesser Leaders will sleep safer knowing that you are guarding them," mewed Marigoldflower from the tree, before hopping down. "Dismissed."

The other nine leaders descended as well, landing lightly on their feet and returning to their den.

Robinpaw noted keenly that Quailwhisker walked almost immediately over to Owltalon, where they quickly twined tails. *It seems that Larkfoot was right*, she thought, purring at the thought.

Slowly, the rest of FloraClan began to disperse, and Robinpaw felt Greypaw get up to leave.

Robinpaw laid her tail across his back, forcing him to sit back down. "Do you have to work today?" she asked curiously. Was the practice of trainees getting the day off only in her den?

Greypaw hesitated, then shook his head. "Not right away."

"Then...will you talk to me?" asked Robinpaw.

Greypaw flicked his tail. "Sure." He paused, turning to look at someone waiting patiently beside her. "Um, who's your friend?"

Robinpaw suddenly remembered that Thrushpaw was still beside her, Swallowpaw having left quietly sometime before. "Oh! Right. Uh, Thrushpaw, this is my brother Greypaw. Greypaw, this is my friend Thrushpaw."

"Nice to meet you," mewed her friend politely, inclining her white head.

"Likewise," muttered Greypaw, staring determinedly at his paws.

Robinpaw turned her gaze back to her brother. Something was off. "Greypaw? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he replied, still not meeting her gaze. "It's just...you're a hunter, you know?"

How is that a problem? "So?"

"I'm not supposed to talk with my superiors."

Oh. All of a sudden, everything made sense-- him cautiously making sure he could sit next to her, then his reluctance to talk to her...all because someone said she was *better* than him.

Suddenly FloraClan didn't seem so great anymore.

"I'm your *sister*," insisted Robinpaw, guilt and anger coursing through her veins. "You can always talk to me."

"You can always talk to me too," put in Thrushpaw, who Robinpaw had nearly forgotten was there. She felt a rush of gratitude towards the white she-cat for being so kind. There was some kind of pity and empathy in her eyes as well, almost as if she knew how he was feeling.

Robinpaw wondered which of the Lesser Leader trainees was *her* sibling.

"Thanks," mewed Greypaw, finally meeting their gazes.

Robinpaw purred. "No problem." The silver she-cat paused, wondering whether or not to ask the question she was yearning to ask. "What's it like? Being a Servant."

Greypaw flicked his tail non-comitantly. "It's fine. Exhausting, I guess. But fine."

Clearly, that was all he had to say on the matter. Robinpaw exhaled sharply and dropped the matter. "More importantly, Greypaw, how are *you*?" she asked.

He twitched his ears thoughtfully. "Not bad. Not the *happiest*, I suppose, but there are things that make it not as bad."

As he spoke, his eyes flicked toward someone over Robinpaw's shoulder, and she poked his shoulder teasingly. "Does my brother *like* somebody?"

Greypaw licked his chest, embarrassed. "Be quiet, Robinpaw."

Thrushpaw turned to look in the direction that Greypaw had. "I wonder who it is...hmm, Fawnpaw, perhaps?"

The reaction was unmistakeable; Greypaw ducking his head head and shrinking back. "Shh."

Robinpaw purred along with Thrushpaw, stopping only when Larkfoot gently prodded her shoulder. "Robinpaw? Thrushpaw? It's time to go."

With a wave of her tail as she departed, Robinpaw's dark thoughts once away spiraled away into the wind.

Happy Holidays, everyone! I hope you've enjoyed this chapter! Sorry it's one day late (because YES, procrastinating Ember has made herself a schedule-- every Saturday!). Agh I have so many ships...

Yes, authors can ship their own characters. I'm not weird or something. I think.

Anyway, what do you think of the new characters I've introduced? Reactions to Greypaw's return? And, ah, do you have a favorite ship?

I just realized that maybe I'm the only one with ships. And I'm the *author*.

Kay, enough rambling! Merry Christmas, Hanukkah and Kwanzaa!

~Ember

The Tree Hunt

Robinpaw blinked open her eyes to the soft glimmers of dawn.

Huh. That's weird, she thought. *Normally, someone else has to wake me up...*

Right on cue, Swallowpaw stretched and turned to face Robinpaw, stopping, confused. "Well, this is a first, isn't it?"

Robinpaw nodded drearily, before turning to face the still slumbering Thrushpaw. "Uh, should I wake..?"

Thrushpaw yawned and stretched. "No need." She stopped, suddenly realizing that Robinpaw had spoken. "Robinpaw! You're awake!"

Robinpaw licked her chest, embarrassed. "I guess I finally got used to waking up so early..."

Thrushpaw purred. "Took you long enough!"

"Anyway," interrupted Swallowpaw, "we're going tree hunting today!" Her mew sounded excited, almost proud.

"*We*?" Robinpaw wondered if her mind was still muddled for sleep.

Swallowpaw purred. "Well, I get to accompany you today! I've finished learning all the moves now, so Mousefang said that I could protect you guys!"

Robinpaw nodded, excitement filling her as well. She'd never trained with Swallowpaw before!

On the other side of the den, Foxtail, Mousefang and Moletail were waking from their sleep. Foxtail stretched, glancing in Robinpaw's direction. Surprise lit her yellow-green gaze for a moment, but she quickly masked it and walked over to her trainee's side calmly.

"We'll be going to go tree hunting," mewed her mentor. "I assume Swallowpaw has told you that she'll be guarding you?"

Robinpaw nodded. Swallowpaw shot her an excited glance, and the silver she-cat returned it eagerly.

Thrushpaw turned to Moletail, who was slowly stretching. "Can we leave?"

Moletail exhaled sharply and grumbled, "Foxtail, can you take her? I'm just so tired..." His mew trailed off with a yawn.

Foxtail nodded understandingly. A glint of amusement flashed in her eyes as her gaze flitted quickly over to a slumbering Starlingclaw. "Of course."

Thrushpaw stared at her mentor curiously, before following Foxtail's gaze to Starlingclaw. She turned to Robinpaw, who could barely suppress a purr.

"Let's go!" mewed Swallowpaw, practically bouncing with excitement now. "Please?"

Mousefang purred, walking over to Foxtail. "Let's go before she explodes of excitement!"

With an amused nod, Foxtail padded out of the den, the rest following, where the pale sunlight slowly washed away the traces of morning fog. A sudden shiver stole through the silver she-cat at the chill. Leaf-fall was approaching.

For once, Robinpaw felt awake enough to truly admire the forest. The leaves above her were tinted the slightest bit orange as the sun cut through them, lighting the whole forest with an etheral light. The trees, though not the closest together, were surrounded by all sorts of foilage that made stalking harder and gave prey more pieces to hide. The bushes' beautiful green was fading slightly to an orange, and Robinpaw wondered how she hadn't noticed before.

"Robinpaw," came a teasing voice from beside her. "Stop gawking and pay attention to your Clanmates!"

With a guilty start, Robinpaw realized she'd veered slightly from the path. She met Thrushpaw's amused gaze, embarrassed, and tried to cover it with a purr.

Speeding up a bit, Robinpaw walked beside her mentor. She opened her mouth to ask her where they were heading, before realizing that she'd been here before-- Thrushpaw had taken her hunting not long ago!

The tall birch tree came into view; it seemed to be where they were heading. Foxtail confirmed her suspicions by nodding at the distant tree. "The Climbing Tree," she mewed. "After all, to tree hunt, you have to be able climb first!"

Robinpaw felt a sudden urge to run to the tree, and catching Swallowpaw's gaze, she could feel that her friend felt the same.

With a sudden thudding of paws, the two she-cat were running toward the tree, Robinpaw's feet padding expertly across the uneven ground. She realized to her shock that she could see the obstacles in her path by the growth of the plants around her-- her hunting had honed her knack for finding the shortest and easiest trail.

In only a few moments, the silver she-cat slowed to a stop beneath the tree, Swallowpaw only a mousetail behind. Robinpaw felt her heart beating hard, energy still flooding though her veins as she looked triumphantly at her challenger.

Swallowpaw let out an embarrassed purr, her breathing as quick as Robinpaw's. "You beat me." She paused, shaking off her momentary jealousy. "But you just seemed to know exactly what was going to be beneath your paws!"

"And you two beat all of us!" called Thrushpaw, slowing to a stop behind them and breathing hard. "We weren't expecting you to dash off like that!"

Mousefang and Foxtail approached them, having followed at a much more reasonable pace. "Take it easy, youngsters," chuckled Mousefang with mock anger. "I'm not getting any younger!"

Foxtail purred, her gaze full of pride as she gazed upon her apprentice. "It seems you've learned the power of observation, haven't you?"

Robinpaw nodded, her heartbeat slowly returning to its normal pace. "So, we're climbing trees?" The run had felt her with a sense of confidence that she'd always lacked-- she felt like she could climb any tree and catch any prey thrown at her.

Foxtail nodded. "Yes." She walked over to the tree, unsheathing her claws and plunging them into the bark. "Birch bark is quite soft, so it's a great tree for climbing. But that doesn't mean it's easy," she added quickly, seeing Robinpaw's expression. "There are some rules that you always have to follow when tree climbing-- first, you always have to make sure you have a partner." She gestured to Thrushpaw. "That partner will be watching you, and making sure you don't climb unto a weak branch. You will also have a protector, someone who watches for outside attacks that could startle or attack your partner or you." For this, she turned to Swallowpaw. "It's also best to always have three claws on the tree at a time, moving one at a time."

Robinpaw nodded, eyeing the bark of the tree warily. "Is that all?"

Foxtail nodded. "The rest is best learned for yourself."

The silver tabby unsheathed her claws, approaching the tree. With a deep breath, she leapt unto the side of the tree, digging her claws into the tree.

Just as Foxtail had said, the birch bark was remarkable soft, and her claws slid in easily. Robinpaw could almost forget that she wasn't standing on the ground, until her claws suddenly began to feel pulled down. Instinctively, Robinpaw pressed herself to the tree, taking one paw off the tree and moving up. Then the back paw.

Robinpaw settled into a rhythm, her movements feeling natural. Her focus expanded as she felt more comfortable, and a smell suddenly hit her.

Squirrell!

Suddenly, Robinpaw's senses went into overdrive, her hearing concentrating until she could hear the skittering of paws above her. She turned her head slowly, taking care not to alert her prey. She spotted the squirrel, its brown body camouflaged among the leaves. She crept closer, and closer...

And suddenly she was on it's branch. Grateful for her small size and the thickness of the branch, the branch didn't even seem to creak.

The squirrel continued eating his meal, oblivious to the predator breaths away.

Robinpaw pounced, her teeth coming down a little sloppily on the squirrel's neck as her claws sank deep in the bark to stop her from overbalancing. It squirmed for a moment, but the bite had thankfully been fatal. It hung limply from the triumphant trainee's jaws.

Below, the she-cat could hear her companions cheering.

Filled with a sense of jubilation and success, Robinpaw crept back toward the trunk of the tree and stopped, hesitating. She looked down at her mentor helplessly, who quickly understood her question.

"Just go down backwards!"

Nodding as well as she could with the squirrel in her grasp, Robinpaw latched back on the trunk and backed down slowly tail first.

Before she knew it, she was back on the ground, surrounded by mews of congratulations.

And for the first time ever, Robinpaw felt like she could really do anything.

Ok, ok, I know. This was really, really late.

ducks to avoid all the rotten fruit flying in my direction

I-I have no excuse.

But, ah, I hope you enjoyed this chapter, despite its tardiness! And don't worry, there should be another update coming out tomorrow or the next day as well, so I should be right back on schedule!

What did you think of Robinpaw's new confidence, the tree climb, and Swallowpaw's reappearance? Should I include her in more chapters?

~a very very late and embarrassed Ember

The Ginger Swallow

Oww!

The jab of a tail, not so gentle, woke Robinpaw out of her sleep.

Robinpaw blinked open her eyes to see Swallowpaw standing above her, an excited light present in her eyes. "Swallowpaw...? What is it...?" Her mew was heavy with sleep, and she wasn't entirely certain whether she was actually awake.

"Swallowpaw! I told you not to wake her up!" The exasperated mew of her mentor woke Robinpaw up the rest of the way.

Swallowpaw let out an exaggerated sigh. "But it's my special day! And she's my friend!"

The silver trainee quickly rose and stretched, wincing as her muscles were jarred by soreness from the tree climbing the day before. *If I'd known it would hurt this much,* she grumbled. *I wouldn't have climbed that tree!*

"It's alright," she mewed aloud. "I don't want to have to be woken up much more, so I need to get used to waking up early."

The meaning of Swallowpaw's words finally penetrated her sleepy brain, and she turned to gape at her. "You're...you're becoming a *full member?*"

Swallowpaw nodded. "Yesterday was my last test, to prove that I could look after others," she mewed. "You didn't see it, but Mousefang snuck into the bushes and jumped out to attack you! I fended him off." Her chest puffed out proudly, and she practically glowed with pride.

Robinpaw nodded, her denmate's words not fully absorbed. "But you're *leaving*?" First Quailwhisker, and now

Swallowpaw...Robinpaw suddenly realized she and Thrushpaw would be the only trainees in the den.

Swallowpaw nodded as Foxtail padded over, laying her tail over her trainee. "But I wanted you to sleep in," sighed her mentor. "You deserved rest for that amazing tree-climbing yesterday."

Now it was Robinpaw's turn to puff with pride as the memory returned to her. The squirrel, killed with a bite while she balanced on the branch...

Thrushpaw purred, stretching up from her own nest. "Yeah! That was amazing," she mewed. "I've never seen anyone catch something tree-hunting for the first time!"

The other cats were stirring in their den as well; Robinpaw heard mews of patrols and competitions along with simple gossip. The silver she-cat noticed Quailwhisker curled around Owltalon; neither seemed ready to get up and move. Robinpaw's heart filled to see her friend so full of happiness and free of worry. A day of relaxation-- a relief for trainees, but surely a paradise for full members.

Robinpaw suddenly wondered when the ceremony was actually happening-- she'd apparently been supposed to be able to sleep in. "Foxtail? When is the ceremony?"

Foxtail purred. "Around sun-high," she replied, shoving Swallowpaw in mock irritation. "But your friend here barely let you sleep past dawn."

Swallowpaw licked her chest fur in embarrassment, ducking her head. "Sorry, Robinpaw. I was just so...excited."

Robinpaw twitched her nose in amusement, accepting her excuse with a nod of her head. "It's fine, Swallowpaw! I'd probably had done the same thing!"

Foxtail flicked her tail hesitantly, glancing out the entrance anxiously as if excited to go meet someone. "I'll let you guys figure out what you do for yourselves," she mewed lightly, padding out of the entrance of the den as casually of possible.

I wonder who she's going to meet? thought Robinpaw teasingly. *I should ask her sometime...*

Thrushpaw and Swallowpaw, however, were already arguing over what to do in earnest. Robinpaw eyed them worriedly before realizing that the argument was in jest-- neither was actually angry with each other.

"Hunting! Please?" Thrushpaw's yellow eyes widened in supplication, though Swallowpaw flicked it off.

"Come on!" mewed Swallowpaw. "Can't we practice battle moves? You went hunting yesterday-- and besides, you have to know how to defend yourselves!"

Thrushpaw rolled her eyes. "But I don't *want* to practice battle moves! There's a reason I'm not a Warrior trainee."

Swallowpaw turned to Robinpaw. "Come on? Do you really agree with her?"

But Robinpaw's mind was frozen, stuck in a place where bloodshed was the only way forward and the blood of others coated her fur and talons. The long-healed wound on her head began throbbing as the trainee remembered Brownkit's jesting voice, then Tankit lying bleeding on the ground...

No one tried to help him! The Leaders didn't call the Healer...they let him die! They wanted *him to die!*

Evidently taking Robinpaw's silence as disagreement, Swallowpaw turned back to Thrushpaw. "That settles it, them. Robinpaw agrees with me; let's go to the Training Ground!"

Robinpaw opened her mouth to protest, but her mind was still caught in the confines of memory. She felt scratches appear on her pelt, felt the claws of Lilyflower and Brownkit carve into it. They appeared one by one, and slowly leaked out warm liquid that clumped up her pelt. She tried to scream, but some scrap of self control stopped her from breaking down completely and letting her stay standing.

Finally, a single word escaped her mouth: "Help..."

With that, Robinpaw started to fall, only to feel someone-- Thrushpaw? Swallowpaw? catch her, and her vision began to darken.

Still, Robinpaw fought hard not to let the claws of darkness overtake her, sinking her claws into the reality of the soil as an anchor to consciousness.

"Robinpaw? Robinpaw?" Thrushpaw's worried mew slipped in and out of her mind, and she grasped frantically unto it. She focused on Thrushpaw, and her time she'd spent with her, and the darkness slowly lifted-- curtains torn apart by Robinpaw's frantic claws. She struggled to keep the gap open long enough to make eye contact with her closest friend.

"Thrushpaw?" asked Robinpaw weakly. "I'm so...tired..."

Robinpaw could feel Thrushpaw's heart quicken, her pelt pressed against her own. "Robinpaw, you'll be alright!"

Robinpaw nodded weakly, hearing footsteps and smelling Moonblaze and Swallowpaw's scents overwhelm her. "Thank you..."

And with that, Robinpaw let go of the dark curtains, and the claws of darkness pulled her into peace.

~----------~

Robinpaw awoke to the scent of herbs and a familiar presence sitting beside her. She heard the pacing footsteps of a cat about her size and the scent of another, and her mind was filled with relief and happiness. "Thrushpaw? Foxtail? Swallowpaw?"

Immediately, Thrushpaw's footsteps quickened and hurried to her side. Foxtail sat up from her spot and breathed a sigh of relief, and Swallowpaw looked up from her place in the corner of the den.

"Robinpaw!" Thrushpaw mewed, burying her nose in her fur.

Robinpaw's spirits lifted and she felt relieved that her friend was

there, with her. She turned her head to face Swallowpaw, who looked away in embarrassment.

"I'm sorry," she mewed quietly, her golden head dropping in utter remorse.

"It wasn't your fault," insisted Robinpaw. "When's your ceremony?"

Swallowpaw glanced outside of the den at the sun. "About now." She paused. "But if you're not well enough..."

Robinpaw waved her tail, dismissing the thought. "No! It's your time to become a full member." She rose from her moss bed, surprisingly steady on her feet. She walked past Swallowpaw outside, squinting slightly at the glare of the sun in her eyes. She heard her friends and mentor follow her, and she sat down beneath the tree to hear the call.

"All cats old enough to serve meet under the Great Tree!"

The cry came from Marigoldflower as the Leaders emerged from their places in the Tree.

The ceremony seemed to pass in a blur, with Poppyflower reciting the words with her paw on Swallowpaw's head. Robinpaw noted, belatedly, that she was indeed not alright, drifting in and out of focus. Her mind, however, was able to supply the words she missed with those from Quailwhisker's ceremony.

"...Swallowpaw, from this moment on, your name shall be Swallowtooth, in honor of your fierceness and excellence in the battle moves involving teeth."

Robinpaw snapped into focus, prepared to cheer for her friend, before realizing that there was another cat up there. *Her sister?*

This time, it was Lilyflower who came down from the tree, and Robinpaw shivered. Lilyflower recited the words over the apprentice, who Robinpaw assumed was a Servant, until she got to the last lines: "Gingerpaw, from this moment on, your name shall be Gingerfur." That was all-- no reason, no distinguishment. Just a mark of utter unindividuality attached to the end of their names.

Marigoldflower mewed something about them guarding the Leaders, and FloraClan erupted into cheers. "Swallowtooth! Gingerfur! Swallowtooth!"

Robinpaw joined them enthusiastically until the chanting stopped, and the cats went to congratulate the new members. Robinpaw headed toward Swallowpaw before noticing the large crown around her.

She sighed. *I'll just congratulate her when she goes back to the den*. She turned to head back there as well when she spotted Swallowtooth's sister, only congratulated by a couple other servants and an elder that Robinpaw could only assume was her mother.

Robinpaw felt a stab of pity, and began padding toward the she-cat.

Gingerfur turned at her approach, looking shocked. "Hello," she muttered, looking down at her paws.

"Congratulations," mewed Robinpaw. Her mew sounded hollow, false. She could tell that becoming a full member servant wasn't really any better than being a trainee, and she knew that Gingerfur could hear it in her mew. In the silence that followed, Robinpaw asked her a question she knew her brother would avoid answering: "What is it like? Being a servant?"

Gingerfur shrugged, still not meeting her gaze. "Not too bad," she mewed. "You just need to do what others say. It may be hard work, but...it's not like we could do anything else."

Robinpaw tilted her head, a little surprised by this answer. Another silence followed, this time broken by another question. "And do you...like anybody?"

Gingerfur finally looked up. "*Like* anybody?" she asked. "I mean, it doesn't really matter. For servants, anyway. No one want us, so we are normally just claimed for a little while."

"*Claimed?*"

"When a male of...higher rank is our mate for a while, though only until we have kits and raise them. Then, we're free until the next

time." She paused. "Unless someone makes a permanent claim, and we agree."

The words the silver trainee had planned to say froze in her mouth as this statement sunk in. "And there's no escape?" she breathed.

Gingerfur shook her head. "But don't you know this?" she asked.

No...I didn't anything *about know this,* thought Robinpaw grimly, a sort of icy cold coming over her body as Gingerfur's words were carved into her mind. *Why* don't *I know this? Isn't this important?*

Robinpaw began running, running back to the den, not even bothering to say goodbye to Gingerfur. Her mind was too flurried, too haunted by the statements she'd just heard.

What kind of a place really is *FloraClan? And what other secrets does it keep from those who inhabit it?*

Wow, quite an action-packed (and long) chapter! I hoped you enjoyed (though it was a little late) and that I don't make you..run from this book from this last section. I know some people will...It's kind of like forced marriage, but it's temporary...and it sucks. I'm NOT advocating this in any way, in fact I'm more trying to make people aware of how much it ca sucks.

Anyway, that aside...what do you think of this new info? What did you think of Robinpaw's panic attack? And finally (though i know you haven't seen a lot of her) what do you think of Gingerfur?

~the ever-late Ember

The Fawn's Beginnings

Robinpaw was *not* looking forward to Training today.

She was dreading it, in fact.

Why do Hunters *have to learn to fight?*

She heaved a sigh as she answered her own question. *Because we have to be able to defend ourselves...*

That didn't really make it any easier, however. At least the last time she'd panicked had been a moon ago...

"Robinpaw? We...we need to go to the Training ground." Thrushpaw's mew was full of sympathy.

The silver she-cat stood up silently from her place in her nest, paws heavy. Thrushpaw exhaled and draped her tail over her friend.

"I"m sorry, Robinpaw," she mewed softly. "I wish we could excuse you from this. But to become a full member...you have to."

Robinpaw nodded mutely. "No claws?" she asked her approaching mentor.

"No claws," she agreed.

I can do this, Robinpaw mewed. *These are my friends! They won't hurt me! And I won't have to see any blood...*

"Swallowtooth?" Moletail's mew caused the golden Warrior to lift her head.

"Yes?" she asked, yawning. "Another patrol? I've already been on one tod--" She stopped, seeing Robinpaw and Thrushpaw standing patiently beside their mentors. "Oh."

She didn't have to ask why they were coming; she simply walked with them to the Training Ground. Robinpaw began to shake, and Thrushpaw gently led her on.

Dread crept into Robinpaw's body as they neared the plant-free area, filling her until she wanted to stop. *No claws...no claws...*

She didn't realize that she'd shut her eyes until her mentor stopped suddenly. "Fawnpaw? Oh, I'm sorry. We can wait..."

Robinpaw's eyes shot open as the name Fawnpaw registered in her brain. *So* this *is who my brother likes...*

The creamy-brown she-cat gave a small shiver of shock as she realized she wasn't alone. She turned away from the plant she'd been digging up and her yellow-green gaze fixed on Foxtail angrily before abruptly falling downward in submission.

"I apologize, Hunter. I will leave if you so wish." Her voice was monotone and emotionless, without any sort of sincerity.

Foxtail waved the apology aside. "It's alright. No need to be formal here, anyhow." She didn't seem to notice Moletail and Swallowtooth's suspicious glances in her direction, and Robinpaw's blood turned to ice.

From what she'd learned in this Clan, formality was *very* important. And Foxtail had just thrown that aside.

Fawnpaw had visibly balked as well, choosing her words carefully. "I don't think that would be wise, Hunter."

Foxtail blinked, confused, before noticing what she'd said. Her eyes widened, and her gaze dropped to the ground. "Oh."

Robinpaw turned to Thrushpaw, who looked just as worried as she did. *Not Foxtail! She doesn't have a rebellious bone in her body! They can't kill her...they just can't...*

Thrushpaw prodded her mentor's side softly. "Don't turn her in," she breathed. "It's one mistake..."

Swallowtooth blinked, eyeing both Thrushpaw and Moletail indecisively. A shiver went through them, and Thrushpaw backed away from her mentor.

Do I even know you anymore? wondered the silver she-cat, remembering her cheerful, energetic friend she'd raced and laughed with. *What have they done to you?*

Swallowtooth finally dropped her gaze. "I won't turn you in," she sighed. "But if this happens again..." She let the question hang in the air.

Foxtail's claws sheathed with a *shink*, and Robinpaw belatedly noted that she'd been digging her own into the ground. Fawnpaw relaxed as well, shooting Swallowtooth a grateful glance

"Right," mewed Foxtail, mew shaky. "Battle training."

~----------~

"Dodge left! Roll! Attack right!"

Swallowtooth's orders snapped through the air, filling Robinpaw with a sense of confidence and trust she hadn't felt since tree hunting. She *wasn't* a bad fighter...but she was certain her "skill" would disappear as soon as blood was drawn.

Thrushpaw darted left to right, her white pelt popping out distractingly against the red and gold of leafbare. The leaves crackled as she rolled, and she took a moment to admire their beauty.

"Dodge!"

Unfortunately, the trainee's mind was still on the leaves, and the order took a moment to register. In a blur of white, suddenly the silver she-cat was on the ground, struggling to breathe.

Thrushpaw purred as she stood over Robinpaw triumphantly. "Ha!"

"Belly rake!"

This time, Robinpaw wasn't distracted as her paw shot up and mimed a rake down Thrushpaw stomach. The white trainee let out a fake cry of agony and toppled over, then jumped up to continue the fight.

Thrushpaw lunged toward her, a terrifying sight, and Robinpaw just barely ducked out of the way. Fighting was surprisingly easy for her, something she'd never even imagined could be remotely true. *Still*, she worried as she rolled to dodge another attack, *as soon as claws came out, I'd be done for.*

"Stop!"

Both cats froze, breathing hard.

"You're done for now," mewed Moletail. "You can go talk to each other while Swallowtooth and I have a talk with Foxtail."

Robinpaw dipped her head, following Thrushpaw off the Training Ground. She watched for a moment as Foxtail's head dipped in submission to her companions' words, then turned away awkwardly.

To her surprise, Fawnpaw was still there, digging up a plant on the edge of the clearing. She turned as she noticed Robinpaw's glance, and pulled the plant out with a final tug of her jaws.

"Hi," mewed Fawnpaw hesitantly. She'd undoubtedly noticed Robinpaw's awkwardness earlier with her mentor and didn't know how to approach her.

Of course, neither did Robinpaw, for that matter.

"Hi," she mewed. *How do you talk to someone that your sibling likes?* she wondered. "I'm, uh, Greypaw's sister."

Fawnpaw nodded. "I know," she mewed. "He talks about you, about how you're his favorite sibling."

Robinpaw purred at Fawnpaw's words. It didn't really shock her, of course, but it wasn't like she had much competition.

A silence stretched between them; a silence that neither wanted to break.

Thankfully, at that moment Thrushpaw joined them. "Fawnpaw! So *you're* the one that Greypaw likes!"

"Thrushpaw!" hissed Robinpaw.

Thrushpaw flicked her tail. "What? It's not like she doesn't know."

"He does?" asked Fawnpaw, licking her chest in embarrassment. "He likes me?"

Robinpaw sighed. "See! Look what you've done, Thrushpaw!"

"I don't mind," mewed Fawnpaw with a purr. The creamy-brown she-cat settled down comfortably on the ground, green eyes bright. "Tell me more!"

Thrushpaw opened her mouth to respond, but Robinpaw slapped her tail over it. "Enough," she purred. "If she really wants to know, have her ask him herself!"

Fawnpaw looked down shyly. "I'll do that," she mewed.

The three she-cats purred for a moment before falling into a more comfortable silence.

"So, why are you here alone?" asked Thurshpaw suddenly. Robinpaw wanted to rebuke her for being too prying, but secretly wanted to know herself.

Fawnpaw sighed, looking down t her paws. "Well, I'm in trouble," she mewed. "I was a little too informal with Tulippaw--" She froze suddenly. "By the Sun and Moon, I'm doing it again. You don't mind, do you?"

Both Robinpaw and Thrushpaw shook their heads.

"Of course not!" mewed Robinpaw.

"Yeah, we won't turn you in." At this, Thrushpaw lowered her voice,

not wanting to let their mentors hear.

Fawnpaw's tense form relaxed. "Thank you."

"No problem," mewed the silver she-cat. She paused, then added: "So how informal was this?"

Fawnpaw purred nervously. "Well, I was joking with Tulippaw, and she asked for a bird the size of a rabbit. I purred and said 'Sorry, but there isn't one...' " She paused. "And a Leader happened to be walking by..."

Robinpaw winced. "So you 'refused an order'. "

"It could've been worse," pointed out Thrushpaw. "They could've exiled you for that."

The silver trainee blinked at her denmate's words. *Exile her? Surely not...*

Fawnpaw nodded. "True," she mewed. "But the most irritating part is that she's my *littermate.* Surely being 'informal' with your littermate is alright!"

Now Robinpaw was getting worried. Would she not be able to speak to Greypaw? It did seem strange to not be able to talk to littermates of different ranks...

Lost in thought, it wasn't until she heard paw steps that she realized their time of freedom was coming to an end.

Robinpaw whipped back towards the other trainees. "Thrushpaw, Fawnpaw," she hissed. "They're coming."

Immediately, the friendly banter halted, replaced by a cold formality. Moletail glanced at the tree trainees suspiciously, from Fawnpaw digging up another plant to the two young Hunters, before turning away. "It's time to go back," he said.

Thrushpaw and Robinpaw exchanged glances before complying, falling a little behind the others for a moment of solitude.

Robinpaw glanced at her friend. "I don't want to be a full Hunter," she sighed. "Don't you agree?"

Thrushpaw couldn't meet her eyes. "That's the thing, Robinpaw," she sighed. "I'm about to become one."

Well look here! A chapter!

How late is this thing...?

sigh

Exams. All I can say. *Exams*.

Anyway, what do you guys think of Fawnpaw? A bit..worried by the strictness of FloraClan? Also, how do you feel about Thrushpaw becoming a full member? Any guesses on her name?

As always, thanks for reading and please tell me what you think.

Edited by WarriorCatMoon335 :)

(Also, sorry for the early update without the A/N. Whoops.)

The Thrush's Ascension

Robinpaw shifted on her moss.

She closed her eyes briefly, furiously trying to escape her thoughts, but it was no use. Of course, whenever she *wanted* to fall asleep, she never could.

And right now, she wanted that more than anything.

She turned to look at her denmate, who was sleeping peacefully, and sighed softly. Thrushpaw's white fur shone in the faint moonlight coming in through the door, emphasizing her size.

Why am I so much younger than my denmates?

She shifted restlessly again. Tomorrow, she'd have this entire side of the den to herself. Some may have relished this, but it just seemed to be emphasizing how young Robinpaw was. *I've only been here four moons,* she thought gloomily. *And now everyone is ready to move on.*

She thought back to her kithood, about the younger kits who'd eventually be her denmates. Finchfeather's kits-- Russetkit, Goldenkit, and Whitekit-- might join her soon. She paused, thinking. *They're four moons younger, right? So they'll be joining me any time now.*

Not that she was sure that was a good thing. She barely remembered them-- there'd been enough kits that they were separated in Testing. She only knew them from when they were up to two moons old, which wasn't exactly the best age to judge their character at.

But at least I won't be alone.

Satisfied in this thought, Robinpaw finally drifted off to sleep.

~----------~

Robinpaw blinked open her eyes at the first rays of the sun. She turned to look at her mentor, who was sleeping in the corner of the den. It was almost normal now to wake up before the others. She purred quietly. *This'll take some getting used to. It's so weird to be awake first...*

A stirring to her right caused her to rethink her assumption. Someone else *was* awake. She turned to see Quailwhisker blinking at her sleepily. She raised her tail in greeting, and Robinpaw inclined her head in acknowledgement.

The tortoiseshell she-cat dipped her head toward the exit, and Robinpaw nodded. She stepped out of the den, watching Quailwhisker carefully pick her way across the sleeping cats before joining her in the clearing.

"How are you doing?" asked Robinpaw. She hadn't really talked much to Quailwhisker after the tortoiseshell had become a full member.

Quailwhisker purred happily. "Great."

"How's Owltalon?"

A dreamy look covered Quailwhisker's face as she looked back at her sleeping mate. "Amazing."

Robinpaw couldn't resist teasing her a bit. "Do you always look so dreamy even when you're speaking to him?"

The faraway look on Quailwhisker evaporated. "Shut up."

The silver trainee bit back a purr. "Sorry." She paused, looking down at her paws. "Can I go hunting with you before...before Thrushpaw's ceremony?"

Quailwhisker sent her a sympathetic glance. "Sure." She padded quietly back into the den, then poked her mate gently. "Owltalon. Wake up."

"Hmm?" Owltalon's eyes opened blearily, a sleepy smile covering his features as his gaze landed on Quailwhisker. "Good morning, dear."

Quailwhisker purred. "Can you come hunting with Robinpaw and I?"

"Robinpaw..?" He looked past Quailwhisker before noticing Robinpaw. "Oh."

"Yes, *oh*. Now get up, you lazy pile of bones," mewed Quailwhisker, nudging him again.

"Right." Owltalon stood up and stretched, the muscles under his fur rippling. Robinpaw purred to herself as she saw how he glanced at Quailwhisker as he did this. *He's trying to impress her, isn't he?*

"Hurry up!" mewed Quailwhisker, exasperated.

Owltalon winked at Robinpaw, beforer turning to his mate. "Alright, dear." He began walking forward exaggeratingly slowly.

Quailwhisker rolled her eyes. "Come *on*."

"Fine."

Owltalon started walking at a normal pace, then slowly and purposefully turned and started walking the opposite direction.

Quailwhisker sighed again, beginning to turn and follow him. She paused, looking back at Robinpaw and mewed with a purr, "At this point, we'll never get any hunting done."

~----------~

Robinpaw looked down proudly at her catches. "I got *two* birds," she boasted.

Quailwhisker swatted her playfully. "Shut up."

"And a squirrel!"

"Robinpaw..."

Owltalon sidled up next to his mate. "No matter how much prey she may get, it'll never beat the catch I got-- you!"

Quailwhisker shoved him aside, a purr escaping her. "Owltalon, how about you go scout for foxes or something?"

"Whatever you say, my dear." Owltalon winked at her, then bounded off through the trees, nose to the ground.

The silence that followed was purposeful as Quailwhisker carefully arranged her prey to be able to carry it. Robinpaw watched her quiety-- she'd already done hers, and it sat in a neat pile next to her paws.

"You really love him, don't you?" she asked suddenly, flicking her silver tail.

Quailwhisker ducked her head. "I do."

Robinpaw purred. "You're so cute together." She let the silence stretch for a minute. "I hope I find someone too," she mewed quietly.

"Aren't you and Thrushpaw--"

"What?!"

"Joking, joking. Though your reaction would make me think otherwise..."

"Shut up." Now it was Robinpaw delivering Quailwhisker's most common phrase as she ducked her head.

Did she really like Thrushpaw in that way? *It's not like it's allowed anyway,* she thought angrily, dismissing the thought from her mind.

Quick. A subject change...

"You seem...different," blurted out Robinpaw.

"Hey!" snapped Quailwhisker. "I'm *normal.*"

"Never mind."

It was then that Owltalon chose to return. "The coast is clear, my

dear. No foxes!"

"Good," she replied cheerily. "Now, to the prey pile we go!"

~----------~

As they dropped their prey in the prey pile, Robinpaw couldn't help but reflect on Owltalon and Quailwhisker's relationship. The teasing...it almost seemed cruel. But they both seemed to take it in stride.

I guess I'm just not that sort of cat, then, thought Robinpaw in amusement.

"All cats old enough to serve meet under the Great Tree!"

Already?

FloraClan began to gather beneath the tree, now bare, its leaves coating the clearing with gold and red.

A she-cat with startling white fur and a dark grey tom sat near the front, and Robinpaw froze, the realization that she was going to be the only trainee suddenly hitting her.

Alone. I'm going to be alone.

"Robinpaw?" It was Quailwhisker, she'd noticed how the silver trainee had frozen. Her mew turned more sympathetic as she followed the she-cat's gaze to Thrushpaw. "Come on. You have to."

"Right." Robinpaw moved to join the two mates reluctantly.

Alone.

"Thrushpaw, step forward."

A faraway part of her brain registered that the speaker was Roseflower, but she was still fixated on the one fact. *Alone.*

"Oh, Sun and Moon, the givers of light and life, look down upon me to approve my choice. Thrushpaw, you have proved an excellent

contributor to the Den of Hunters and Warriors. Your excellent tree-hunting and scent-tracking are held in the highest regard by every member of FloraClan. Moletail, is your trainee Thrushpaw prepared to take on the role of a full member of the Den of Hunters and Warriors?"

"She is, Leader of the Flowers."

"Then by the power granted to me by my position, I give you your name. Thrushpaw, from this moment on, your name shall be Thrushnose, in honor of your exceptional tracking and scenting skills. The Den of Hunters and Warriors welcomes you as a full member."

"Thrushnose! Thrushnose!"

Robinpaw opened her muzzle to cry out as well, but nothing came out. Quailwhisker turned to her, exasperated.

"Robinpaw, you mousebrain! She's your friend! Be happy for you, and stop thinking of yourself for once!"

That did it. Robinpaw snapped out of the track of self-pity she'd been stuck in ever since Thrushpaw--now Thrush*nose*-- had told her she'd be becoming a full member.

Besides, didn't I tell myself only last night that I wouldn't *be alone?* Robinpaw joined the cheering enthusiastically.

"Alderpaw, step forward." It was Ashbranch looking down at the trainee this time.

Alderpaw. So that was his name. Not that it was surprising she didn't know it-- Leader trainees and the others didn't really interact.

"Oh, Sun and Moon, the givers of light and life, look down upon me to approve my choice. Alderpaw, you have proved an excellent contributor to the Den of Lesser Leaders. Your excellent debating skills are held in the highest regard by every member of FloraClan. Birchtwig, is your trainee Alderpaw prepared to take on the role of a full member of the Den of Lesser Leaders?"

The light brown Lesser Leader nodded his head. "He is, Leader of the Trees."

"Then by the power granted to me by my position, I give you your name. Alderpaw, from this moment on, your name shall be Aldertwig, and shall be forever unless you ascend in the ranks. The Den of Lesser Leaders welcomes you as a full member."

"Aldertwig! Aldertwig! Aldertwig!"

Robinpaw joined in the shouting, but her eye was somehow drawn to the Testing area, where three kits watched the ceremony curiously from the trees.

She remembered doing that as well, watching in awe as older cats went through ceremonies she didn't understand.

But they will understand, and soon.

And then...and then...

I won't be alone.

Look at this! A chapter! And (fingers crossed) two more coming soon!

Also, 2K views.

wut

Anyway, what did you think of this chapter? Quailwhisker and Owltalon's relationship? Predictions about the new characters? Feelings about Thrushnose's full member name?

See you all next chapter!

Also THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU for 2K views

still in shock

~Ember

The Leopard and the Bear

"All cats old enough to serve meet under the Great Tree!"

Robinpaw's ears pricked as she headed toward the Great Tree. *Apparently my thoughts of denmates were closer than I thought.*

Ashbranch leapt down from his place on the tree and beckoned with his tail. The three Testees walked stepped forward, quivering with excitement.

Well, one of the Testees looked excited, anyway. Russetkit and Whitekit looked more calm and resigned than their littermate, who were positively shaking with excitement.

"We are gathered here to witness a momentous event. Three Testees are ready for their Naming Ceremonies." He fixed Goldenkit, Russetkit, and Whitekit with serious looks. "Do you understand, young ones, that this ceremony will dictate your future- your treatment, your role, and your position in FloraClan society?"

Goldenkit squeaked out an excited "I do!" while his littermates simply nodded solemnly.

"Then the Ceremony will begin," mewed Ashbranch, taking her place back up on the Great Tree and glancing at Oakbranch. At his nod, Pinebranch, Maplebranch, and Cedarbranch leapt down from the Great Tree. Pinebranch stepped towards Whitekit.

"Whitekit, step forward."

He did so, without any hesitation.

"Whitekit, for six moons you have been Tested to determine your abilities and which Rank you should be placed in. Your Tester and the other Leaders have conferred, and we have determined your Rank. Whitekit, do you promise, on the Sun and Moon, to remain

faithful to the Den of Leaders unto death, and to serve your elders to the best of your abilities?"

Whitekit nodded. "I do." He didn't seem surprised.

"Then by the powers granted to me by my position, and by the power of the Sun and Moon, your name will be Willowpaw. You shall never abandon your Den, and will reside with the Den of Lesser Leaders until death, motherhood, or promotion. Rowantwig, you are ready to receive your first Trainee. I trust that you will pass down all you know to him."

The dark brown tom stepped forward out of the crowd and touched noses with Willowpaw, looking calm and composed.

"Goldenkit, step forward."

Goldenkit was not as calm as his brother; he almost skipped toward Maplebranch in his excitement.

"Goldenkit, for six moons you have been Tested to determine your abilities and which Rank you should be placed in. Your Tester and the other Leaders have conferred, and we have determined your Rank. Goldenkit, do you promise, on the Sun and Moon, to remain faithful to the Den of Hunters and Warriors unto death, and to serve your elders to the best of your abilities?"

"I do," he replied, quivering.

"Then by the powers granted to me by my position, and by the power of the Sun and Moon, your name will be Leopardpaw. You shall never abandon your Den, and will reside with the Den of Hunter and Warriors until death. Crowclaw, you are ready to receive your second Trainee. I trust that you will pass down all you know to him."

The black-and-white tom pushed through the crowd proudly to touch noses with his ecstatic trainee.

Now it was Cedarbranch who spoke. "Russetkit, step forward."

Russetkit did so, looking resigned to his fate now. A defeated look

covered his features, and he looked down at his paws.

"Russetkit, for six moons you have been Tested to determine your abilities and which Rank you should be placed in. Your Tester and the other Leaders have conferred, and we have determined your Rank. Russetkit, do you promise, on the Sun and Moon, to remain faithful to the Den of Hunters and Warriors unto death, and to serve your elders to the best of your abilities?"

Russetkit froze in shock, before finding his voice. "I...I do."

"Then by the powers granted to me by my position, and by the power of the Sun and Moon, your name will be Bearpaw. You shall never abandon your Den, and will reside with the Den of Hunter and Warriors until death. Starlingclaw, you are ready to receive your first Trainee. I trust that you will pass down all you know to him."

Bearpaw looked relieved-- and who could blame him? He'd been sure he'd be made a Servant...

Poor tom, thought Robinpaw sympathetically. *He was so worried! But now...well he's quite lucky!*

Starlingclaw stepped forward out of the crowd and touched her nose with his. She looked almost as shocked as her trainee.

"Bearpaw! Willowpaw! Leopardpaw!" called FloraClan jubilantly.

The leaders jumped out of the Great Tree, dismissing the meeting, and all the cats crowded around the new trainees. So Robinpaw almost jumped when Thrushnose was suddenly beside her.

"Robinpaw!" she mewed. "I've got so much to tell you!"

"Who are you and what did you do to Thrushnose?" Robinpaw mewed jokingly. "You're never gossipy!"

Thrushnose purred. "I'm just so excited to be a full member!" she exclaimed. "Plus, I heard so much gossip when everyone was talking to me afterword."

Robinpaw purred. "Well, what was this gossip?"

"Well," began Thrushnose. "I think that Deerleg will get kits by Ratmuzzle! They were acting so cozy together at my ceremony." She sighed happily. "I'm going to have little siblings!"

Robinpaw couldn't help but purr at Thrushnose's expression. "Aww! That's awesome, Thrushnose!"

Thrushnose nodded. "And they aren't the only kits coming! I think Tanfur's expecting."

Robinpaw's balance was suddenly unsteady as an image of her young brother shot through her brain. She pushed it firmly away. "That's awesome! We're running low on kits in this Clan."

Thrushnose nodded her head. "Especially with Finchfeather's kits becoming trainees today."

Robinpaw nodded. "Speaking of which, I should go meet my new denmates."

"So should I," mewed Thrushnose with a purr.

They made their way over to Bearpaw, who was looking excited, green eyes bright. "Hi," he mewed. "You're...Robinpaw, right?"

Robinpaw nodded. "Yeah. I'm your denmate."

"Cool," he mewed, before glancing over to his brother. "I'm sorry that you have to put up with *him*, though. He's a pain in the tail."

"Who, Leopardpaw?" asked Thrushnose, interested.

Bearpaw nodded. "He's quite the bragger."

Robinpaw wrinkled her nose. *Well then...I can tell who is going to be my favorite of my new denmates.*

"We ought to go meet him anyway, though," mewed Robinpaw's white-furred companion. "It's only polite."

Robinpaw nodded reluctantly. "You're right."

They began making their way towards Leopardpaw, muttering apologies as they pushed past the cats crowding Willowpaw.

I'm sure they're just all trying to become a friend of a future leader, she thought bitterly as she shoved past another cat.

"Watch it!" snapped Aldertwig.

Thrushnose's face fell slightly, and Robinpaw put a comforting tail on her back as they kept approaching Leopardpaw.

As soon as they neared, Robinpaw could tell that her previous assumption had been correct. His mew was full of self-importance and arrogance, and the silver trainee could barely suppress the urge to claw off his stupid face.

"And I'm sure I'll be the *best* hunter that FloraClan has ever seen," he announced, before noticing Robinpaw.

She shivered as he looked her up and down critically. His gaze shifted from curiosity, to pleasure, and then to something...not normal.

"Well, hello there, beautiful," he mewed with a twitch of his whiskers. "Here to meet the amazing hunter?"

Thrushnose hissed. "The only thing you'll be hunting for is common sense," she spat. Her tail twitched back and forth and Robinpaw noticed that she'd unsheathed her claws.

"Whoa, Thrushnose! Calm down," mewed Robinpaw. She turned to glare at the golden tom. "But no. Actually, Leopardpaw, I'm looking for an exit."

She shoved her way through the cats, fur bristling with anger. *What an arrogant piece of crowfood,* she thought. *I wish I hadn't stopped Thrushnose from tearing him to pieces...*

"Hey, beautiful, you do know I'm living with you, right?"

Foxdung.

This was going to be a long four moons.

Well! New characters! Also, I fixed the allegiances (I screwed up the age the first time) so that they could be trainees together sooner.

So, new characters! What do you think of them? Favorite?

Also, in honor of Valentine's day, what's your favorite ship/ couple?

~Ember

P.S.: Thx Holly for editing this for me!

The Flower

Robinpaw yawned and opened her eyes.

She turned to greet Thrushnose, then a pang shot through her when she remembered that she was on the other side of the den now. Even after a couple days, it was still strange to wake up without the white-furred she-cat beside her.

She sighed and turned in her nest, accidentally flicking the golden-furred tom beside her, who, despite her protests, had insisted to sit next to her.

She prayed to the Sun and Moon she hadn't woken him. She tensed nervously, but his breathing remained steady, and her heartbeat returned to normal.

Finally, she began to drift off once more, only to be awaken by her least favorite cat.

"Hey," whispered a voice next to her. "You awake?"

The silver she-cat whipped around to see Leopardpaw stretching. A flash of unfounded annoyance came through her, and it was all she could do to not snap at him. "Yes."

He purred. "Good. Wanna hunt with me?"

Part of Robinpaw wanted desperately to say no, but the other part insisted that she ought to give Leopardpaw a chance. She exhaled. "Fine."

"Great!" mewed Leopardpaw. He stood up, tail lashing excitedly. "Let's go!"

Robinpaw followed her golden-furred denmate, not crazy excited. "Why do you want to hunt anyway? You're a fighter."

He shook his head. "No, I'm not."

What? "Really? But your mentor is a fighter!"

He flicked his tail. "Well, my *actual* mentor is Kestrelflight," he mewed. "But she's being investigated for her possible part in Tankit's death and your...uh, torture."

Robinpaw blinked. "What?"

He nodded. "Yeah, the other ones declined. Larkfoot and Thrushnose are still too young, Harewing is retiring soon, Deerleg and Moletail's trainees *just* became full members and Ratmuzzle is expecting kits."

"Oh."

"Yeah, so I'll be training with you and your mentor. Crowclaw is just my mentor in name. A substitute, per se." The golden tom looked a little shocked that she was so confused. "Didn't you know this?"

Robinpaw shook her head, feeling her fur heat slightly. "No one told me."

He flicked his tail. "Well, alright then. Are we going to hunt, or not?"

"We are," mewed Foxtail, causing the two trainees to spin around. "Bird hunting." She paused, studying the new trainee closely. "It's harder than it seems."

Leopardpaw just smirked. "I'm sure I'll get something."

Robinpaw had to fight back the purr that threatened to escape her muzzle. She knew that she was an exceptionally good bird hunter, and even she had trouble on her first bird hunt.

Her annoyance of Leopardpaw resurged, the confusion of the previous conversation melting away and remembering the look he'd given her. His smug blue gaze met hers, a challenge sparkling in them.

This was going to be fun.

~----------~

They had until sunhigh.

Tilting her head slightly and swiveling her ears, Robinpaw listened for the calls of any birds. Silence-- then a faint twitter in the distance.

Ahead and to the right.

Robinpaw placed her paws carefully on the ground, making doubly sure that no leaves were in her way. She wasn't as worried about the weight of her pawsteps, but she was still careful that he didn't disturb some mouse that would, in turn, alert the bird.

The call came again, a little louder. *I'm a little too far left,* he thought, quickly correcting her course. She scanned the trees ahead of her, trying to locate the elusive creature.

A jeer came through the air, startling her.

Robinpaw's ears pricked as she slowly moved her head to try and spot the bird. She had to stop herself from jerking her head toward the prey-- sudden movement would catch its eye.

She was pretty certain she'd found the right tree, so now she scanned it for a flash of blue or brown. From its call, she was fairly certain it was a jay, though she'd only heard one once.

There!

A bright blue, clearly visible against the red and orange of the tree. The jay cawed again, puffing out his chest proudly and fluttering his wings pompously.

Climbing the tree wasn't an option-- brids were even more sensitive to movement than squirrels and would notice her instantly-- so instead she waited patiently and silently for it to come down and eat.

WIth a flutter, it alighted on the ground and began to eat some type of insect.

A first-time hunter may have leapt then, but Robinpaw knew better. She waited until the bird's head jerked up suddenly, scanning the area for predators. He fluttered his wings once and returned to his prey.

Then she pounced.

The bird didn't even have time to cry out before it was dead with a clean bite to the neck.

It was her third catch. She dropped it proudly and quickly buried it, marking the clearing in her mind. She swiveled her ears again and listened carefully. Not a couple moments later, she heard the distinctive cry of a finch. *Praise the Sun and Moon!*

She crept toward the cry, her pawsteps making little to no noise as she got nearer and nearer. It was very close-- she could see its yellow plumage--

A tweet of terror and alarm.

The finch's frightened cry was abruptly cut off by the thump of paws against the hard earth.

Indignation filled the silver she-cat. How *dare* the new trainee steal her catch! "Hey! That's *mine*, Leopard--"

Her mew froze in her throat as an unfamiliar tortoiseshell she-cat emerged from the bushes, carrying a finch and narrowing its green gaze on her.

Definitely *not* Leopardpaw.

The tortoiseshell dropped the finch and glared at her. "*I* caught it," huffed the she-cat. "My name's not Leopard, either. It's Primrose," she started.

Robinpaw's blood ran cold.

A rogue.

All the terrible stories she'd heard as a kit flashed through her mind. Stories of cats killed just for being from FloraClan, brutal, organized attacks, their lack of mercy-- she had to fight hard to keep from hyperventilating.

The elder's words flashed through her mind-- *pretend to be one of them.* "Robin," she stated, not trusting herself to one more syllable at a time. Besides, Robin was a rogue name, right?

Primrose narrowed her eyes. "Well, you and your companion *Leopard* get the fox-dung outta my land, you got that? We rogues have a code, you know! We leave each other alone-- finding food is hard as it is, with those nasty *Clan* cats shoving us out of every territory with the slightest bit of food--" She froze, studying Robinpaw's expression. "Wait, you're not one of them, right?"

Her entire body stopped moving. She tried to open her mouth and reply, but it refused to work, and she could only stare helplessly at the tortoiseshell before her. She closed her eyes quickly, expecting the rake of claws at any moment.

Then Primrose did something...unexpected.

She looked at her from all angles, then flicked her tail in approval. "You don't seem like a halfway bad sort. You aren't weak, you didn't kill me on sight-- good for you, by the way..." She neared Robinpaw's ear and whispered. "We are the Fire. Our gates are open for those who wish to burn the trees and flowers."

Robinpaw blinked. *Trees and flowers?*

"If you ever need us, we'll meet you in the Great Field," she the mysterious she-cat. "Good luck. The Fire burns on..."

Then the tortoiseshell disappeared into the forest, her pelt of orange and black blending in perfectly with the fallen leaves, finch in her grasp.

The Fire burns on...

Those words haunted her throughout the rest of the hunt.

~----------~

Not surprisingly, when they met up again, Leopardpaw was empty pawed.

"I couldn't find *anything*," he hissed. "I don't think there ARE any! You sent us on an impossible trip!"

Foxtail exhaled sharply. "No, Leopardpaw. Look! Robinpaw, show him your catches."

Smugly, Robinpaw revealed her prey-- a jay, a blackbird, and two finches.

Leopardpaw's blue eyes flashed icy cold for a moment in jealousy as Robinpaw basked in her victory. "Whatever. I'll get you next time."

Robinpaw just nodded skeptically. "Uh-huh. Right."

The golden trainee sighed, then turned to Foxtail. "What now?"

Robinpaw felt a surge of relief that Leopardpaw seemed to be ignoring her-- maybe he'd hate her now!-- but she stayed silent as her mentor replied.

Foxtail shrugged. "Whatever you want. Talk, hunt, whatever."

Leopardpaw turned to the silver trainee, a challenge in his eyes. "Want to hunt? The one with the most prey wins?"

Robinpaw shook her head instantly. "No. I'm going to go talk to Thrushnose." She spun away from him haughtily.

"But, beautiful--"

Robinpaw sped up. "Good-*bye*."

Foxtail purred as Robinpaw stalked into the den and covered her ears with her paws.

Robinpaw could just barely hear her mentor say: "And that,

Leopardpaw, is how *not* to become friends with Robinpaw."

Good. Stay away, she thought angrily. She glanced around, but didn't see Thrushnose anywhere. *Must be hunting,* she thought. *Just my luck.*

Alas, her wish was not to be granted as she heard pawsteps approaching. "Robinpaw?"

She stood up and turned to face him, annoyed. "What?!"

Leopardpaw shuffled his paws. "I'm...I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that-- can we just be friends?" There seemed to be a genuine note of apology in his voice.

I don't really want to...but he sounds sorry. And I know *the difference between sorry and not...*

Robinpaw sighed. *Curse my kindness.* "Maybe," she mewed, and shoved past him out of the den.

Yay! New chapter! *Not* edited, so if you see a mistake, please comment!

A lot of excitement this chapter! What do you think of Primrose and the other rogues she mentioned? What should Robinpaw do? And do you think Leopardpaw's change of heart genuine?

Hope you at least vaguely enjoy this-- I'll work as fast as I can on the next chapter!

~Ember

The Trout

[image]

Robinpaw was beginning to regret her promise to Leopardpaw.

It was actually remarkably difficult to stop from lashing out at him instinctively-- she had no idea why, it was just this feeling of being hunted or being attacked. She couldn't explain it-- especially since he'd been so nice to her as of late.

Well, mostly nice, anyway.

"Good morning, beautiful," he yawned, getting up and stretching. He froze when she fixed him with a glare, then hastily apologized. "Sorry, sorry. I meant Robinpaw."

Thrushnose stirred from her side of the den and got up. "What is it...?" Her eyes brightened when she met Robinpaw's, but narrowed in a scowl when she saw Leopardpaw. She wasn't quite as forgiving as her friend for his earlier behavior.

Robinpaw was starting to think that she had the right idea.

"Hey, you two. We're going to teach you fishing!" Foxtail's excited mew was quite unexpected-- she wasn't normally an early rise.

And *fishing*?

Leopardpaw's ears twitched in excitement. "Cool!"

Robinpaw couldn't help agreeing; she didn't know how to fish, either. There wasn't really much of a demand for it, but a leader would occasionally ask for one, and it was their job to catch one for them.

Thrushnose, however, didn't really share her excitement. "Can I come with?" She looked suspiciously at Leopardpaw, and it didn't take a genius to figure out the rest of her unspoken statement: I

don't trust him alone with you.

The silver trainee brightened, feeling her fur heat up a bit. *She cares about me!*

Foxtail nodded. "Yes. Thank you, Thrushnose," she mewed fervently. "Sun and Moon help me watch over two young, inexperienced fishers."

Thrushnose's cold demeanor melted a bit. "No problem, Foxtail."

Leopardpaw leapt up, quivering with excitement. "So what are we waiting for, then?" Without waiting for an answer, he began running off towards the stream.

The three cats purred. "I remember when I had that energy," sighed Foxtail wistfully. She turned her head to Thrushnose, dipping it in amusement. "Now you get why I want Kestrelflight cleared?"

Thrushnose nodded. "Poor Foxtail. Two crazy trainees!" She bumped Robinpaw jokingly.

An annoyed shout came from up ahead. "Hey! Where are you? I'm already here!"

"Serves you right for running off before us!" called back Robinpaw.

Foxtail and Thrushnose exchanged glances. "Well, we probably should get moving."

Robinpaw nodded. She didn't need to be told twice-- she took off as fast as her legs could carry her.

"Wait! That's not what I meant--" called Foxtail.

Behind her, she could hear Thrushnose's amused purrs.

~----------~

"No, no, *no* Leopardpaw! Don't let your shadow fall on the water! Get on this side! I need to demonstrate!"

Leopardpaw was on the opposite side of the stream, a lazy purr in his voice. "But I want to be across from Robinpaw!"

"Do you think the fish care? No, they don't. Now get to the other side of the fox-dunged stream!" Thrushnose sounded on the edge of losing her patience completely and attacking Leopardpaw-- not something Robinpaw would've complained about.

Leopardpaw let out an exaggerated sigh. "Please?"

Thrushnose rolled her eyes and walked slightly upstream from Leopardpaw, ignoring him. She focused instead on the fish swimming towards her that she was using to demonstrate. She almost had it, but--

Splash!

Thrushnose hissed, her white fur dripping. "What was that for?!"

Leopardpaw flicked his tail. "Didn't you want me on this side of the stream?" His mew was dripping with fake innocence, his eyes growing more amused as Thrushnose began to bristle.

Thrushnose hissed again and muttered some things under her breath that Robinpaw was quite certain weren't compliments of any kind.

Foxtail padded out, astonished, looking from a sopping wet Thrushnose to a smirking, but equally wet, Leopardpaw. "Uh, what happened?"

Robinpaw opened her mouth to reply, but she was too slow. "While you went to the dirtplace, this foxdunged apprentice decided to jump across and be and irritating piece of--"

Foxtail coughed. "Got it." She turned to face the golden-furred trainee. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

Leopardpaw purred. "She did ask me to come over."

Thrushnose glared at him. "I did not ask you to spray me with water though, you insolent trainee!"

"But you--"

"Silence, the lot of you!" snapped Foxtail. "You," she pointed her tail at Leopardpaw, "will NOT talk back to your elders. And you," she gestured to Thrushnose, "need to calm down."

Thrushnose nodded reluctantly. "Right. Sorry, Foxtail."

Foxtail glared pointedly at Leopardpaw.

He flicked his tail. "I'm sorry too."

"Now, Thrushnose, show them how to catch a fish, and Leopardpaw, listen to her! You too, Robinpaw."

The three cats nodded, and Thrushnose walked over to the stream. She stood above the stream, taking care not to leave her shadow over the water. She studied the water determinedly, trying to catch sight of a fish.

Leopardpaw and Robinpaw were a little upstream from her, their shadows also carefully on the ground and not the stream.

Suddenly, Thrushnose's paw shot out and a fish was thrown out of the water and lay on the shore, flapping about before she killed it with a bite to the neck.

Foxtail nodded in approval. "Good, Thrushnose."

She dipped her head in acknowledgement of Foxtail's praise. "Your turn, guys," she swept her tail, gesturing to the stream and stepping back. Robinpaw stepped forward uncertainly, though Leopardpaw leapt to it.

What was it with him? Did he think this was some sort of a competition with Thrushnose? "Leopardpaw," she hissed. "Calm down! What is this with your competitiveness? What even is the competition?"

Leopardpaw rolled his eyes. "Whatever."

Robinpaw flicked her tail. *Fine*. She padded up to the river and bent

over it.

She watched the water carefully, and her paw flashed out when a fish swam by lazily. It flew out of the water and landed with a splat on the stone on the edge of the river.

Robinpaw turned to kill the fish, but a jay jeered in the distance and her eyes left the fish for a moment. That moment of unattention was all it needed to wiggle back into the water.

Foxdung.

She glanced over to Leopardpaw's side; he didn't seem to be having much luck either. She returned her attention to the water, reaching out to catch another fish. This time, she didn't hesitate to bite down on its neck, and it lay limp on the stones.

Her next two tries weren't as lucky-- she'd missed both fish, and the sun was now reaching its highest point in the sky. We'll probably be getting back soon.

Foxtail seemed to be thinking the same that she was, splashing the water to get their attention. "Time to go back."

Robinpaw straightened gratefully, shaking the water off her paws and purring when it hit Thrushnose. The white-furred hunter swatted her with her tail playfully, and Robinpaw purred harder in reply. She picked up her fish and turned to Leopardpaw, who stared dejectedly at Thrushnose's three fish.

She rolled her eyes. "Cheer up. It was our first fish hunt."

Leopardpaw muttered something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like "and now you'll never like me."

Robinpaw stared at him, confused. "How do you think this is a competition? I don't like one of you more than the other!"

Of course, if she was honest, she most definitely did like one of them better than the other, but that wasn't for Leopardpaw to know.

"So you don't like her like that?"

Robinpaw froze. "W-what?"

"You heard what I said."

Foxtail's voice suddenly rang out from ahead of them, saving Robinpaw from having to reply. "Come on! Why are you dawdling? Let's get back to camp and get some food. And for the sake of the Sun and Moon, Robinpaw," snapped Foxtail as they began to move, "pick up your trout."

The two trainees shared a quick glance before Robinpaw clamped the fish in her jaws and began walking back to camp, glad to have avoided Leopardpaw's question.

They sat down and began to eat. Robinpaw yawned loudly, but one glance in Foxtail's direction told her she wasn't going to be resting anytime soon.

"We're going to train after you're done eating. Robinpaw, you'll be demonstrating hunting techniques for Leopardpaw, okay?"

More time with Leopardpaw?

The Sun and Moon must really hate her.

I feel accomplished-- I'm going to keep writing at a super-speed today ^-^

Hope you enjoy this chapter! Special thanks to -joybell- for making the cover featured above and WaveNote for editing this chapter!

Let me know what you think in the comments!

~Ember

P.S.: Sorry everyone for the formatting errors! They should be fixed now.

The Snow

As the three cats walked toward the Training ground, it began to snow.

It was a light snow, the first of the season, and it melted as soon as it hit the warm ground.

But it was still snow.

Robinpaw fluffed out her fur to guard against the chill while staring at the snow in wonder. It wasn't like she hadn't seen snow before-- she had, as a kit (or was it testee? She couldn't remember) but that was so long ago. It *felt* like so long ago.

Leopardpaw, on the other paw, had barely seen snow in his life.

He wrinkled his nose as a snowflake landed on it, then sneezed loudly and purred. He puffed out his fur and shivered as the snow landed on it, but his excitement was evident.

The golden tom pranced around like a kit, only subsiding when Foxtail whacked him lightly with her tail. Even then, though, he looked around with excitement.

He was entranced.

And why wouldn't he be? It was snow.

The first snow.

It shouldn't have surprised her, really. The water had been freezing cold-- even though it wasn't frozer, it was close to it.

Foxtail almost looked tempted to call the training off, but she only sighed and kept walking. Robinpaw noted, however, that there was an almost imperceptible bounce in her step.

It was leaf-bare.

However, that suddenly reminded Robinpaw of how much harder it would be to find prey. No wonder Leopardpaw had been made a Hunter, despite his lack of a mentor. They'd starve without him.

"Foxtail," she called, walking up beside her mentor. "Are we going to be able to catch enough?"

Foxtail shook her head. "Actually, the Servants come and help us this time of year. The good ones, anyway."

Robinpaw's ears pricked. "Really?" *Would Greypaw come?*

Foxtail nodded. "Yep."

They walked in silence for a moment, and Robinpaw shivered as a gust of wind blew through her fur. It was *cold.*

Of course, she thought. *It's snowing!*

They were at the Training ground now, and Robinpaw hadn't even noticed them pass the Testing place. How strange. And how strangely *nice.*

I hope you're proud of me, Tankit.

She shook her head sharply. What was she thinking? Her ancestors couldn't see her!

Moonblaze's stories flashed in her memory.

"Every cat comes from either the Sun or the Moon," mewed the Healer as Robinpaw and her four siblings sat quietly. "The cats of the Sun are the ones in positions of Leadership, and the Moon are the ones who follow them."

Silverkit nodded, looking up at the moon outside. I wonder what it's like up there...

Greykit spoke up suddenly. "What happens when we die?"

"When we die, we join with the Sun or the Moon, happy and complete at last."

Creamkit stretched as Moonblaze exited the nursery. "I'm going to be with the Sun."

Brownkit rolled her eyes. "Suuuure."

Tankit purred and hit Silverkit with his tail. "As long as I'm with my favorite littermate, I don't care."

Robinpaw choked back a sob. *Why* had she thought he could see her?

"Robinpaw?"

Robinpaw jolted. "R-right. Sorry." *I can't even think about my kithood without tearing up!* she thought angrily.

Foxtail purred. "It's fine. I'd like you to critique Leopardpaw's hunting stalk."

Leopardpaw turned to face Foxtail, indignant. "I'm an excellent hunter!"

"And how many pieces of prey have you brought back?" she replied sardonically.

He ducked his head, muttering *none* under his breath.

"What was that?" Robinpaw asked, purring under her breath.

"*None*," he hissed.

"That's what I thought," mewed Foxtail cheerfully. "Now, your stalk, please."

This time, Leopardpaw didn't protest as he sunk down into position. He began creeping quietly forward, and Robinpaw noted three things wrong with his stance.

Three. Not bad.

"Your paws are a little too close together," she told him. "It's pretty easy to lose balance that way. You're also stepping a little too hard on the ground-- mice and rabbits would feel you coming for sure."

Leopardpaw nodded and began again, taking great care to step lightly. "Better?"

Robinpaw nodded. "Yep. Your tail is moving, though. You'll probably hit some sort of branch if you don't stop."

Foxtail purred. "And with snow, that'll be a disaster."

Robinpaw looked at her strangely, but didn't comment.

Leopardpaw straightened his tail and began stalking imaginary prey. His stance was practically perfect now-- probably better than Robinpaw's own-- but he was almost concentrating *too* hard.

Sometimes, instinct was better than instruction.

"It's a little stiff," she informed him. He hissed in frustration and tried to drop naturally into it, and the process repeated again.

"Paws farther apart...step *lightly*...stop moving your tail!"

He tried again and again, but every time he was met with failure.

Finally, Foxtail sighed.

"Robinpaw, you demonstrate the proper stance."

The silver trainee got into position, her muscles straining as she held steady. She turned her head slightly to see Leopardpaw imitating her. He looked like he was at the point of exhaustion, which wasn't surprising, considering how much they'd done today.

"Would you like to actually hunt?" asked Foxtail suddenly. "It'll be good practice. You haven't hunted in the snow before, right?"

Snow? Sure enough, the snow had finally started to stick.

Robinpaw frowned, trying to remember. She had only the vaguest

memories of those times-- it was as if she'd purposefully tried to block them out. "I'm not sure. It would've been very early in my Testing, though."

Foxtail nodded. "Well, I think you should go. Just be back here in a bit."

Robinpaw and Leopardpaw nodded and walked out into the forest.

~----------~

Robinpaw *still* hadn't caught anything.

It was remarkably difficult to stalk anything in the snow.

It also didn't help that most of the animals weren't awake in leaf-fall anyway. She'd only seen one mouse who must've been taken by surprise of this sudden snow. After that, nothing.

But there! A flicker of movement, a flash of brown.

A mouse!

She couldn't afford to lose this one, too.

She made sure that her tail didn't brush the snow like it had last time and walked as lightly as she could, stalking closer, closer...

She pounced, and landed square on the creature.

Ha!

Deciding it had probably been long enough, she began walking back to the clearing, seeing with sudden amusement her haphazardly tracks through the snow.

Then she sighed. She'd have to follow these back. Her scent had long faded, masked by the fast-falling snow.

She looked at the trees, now covered with snow, and curiously hit it with her tail, remembering Foxtail's warning. The snow fell off the tree with a *woomf*, and she shivered as it squashed her to the

ground. She burst out, gasping. *So* that's *why she warned Leopardpaw!*

She purred, shook off her fur and kept walking.

Soon, she entered the clearing, where her companions were waiting with their prey. Foxtail somehow held a bird in her jaws, while Leopardpaw held a squirrel.

A *squirrel.*

Suddenly, her mouse felt insignificant as it fell from her mouth.

Leopardpaw dropped his squirrel and lay down on the snow-covered ground. Robinpaw purred, suddenly forgetting about her mouse and joining him. The snow felt nice under her fur.

It was beautiful.

Robinpaw burrowed a bit into the snow. She was remarkably hot from the hunt, and the snow cooled her off immensely.

Suddenly, footsteps.

A quiet mew.

"I think we're good for today."

The two trainees purred gratefully.

She was so relieved, Robinpaw didn't notice that someone else was with them, looking grim. It didn't seem to occur to Leopardpaw either. They were blissfully ignorant.

It registered with Robinpaw a moment later, though. "Foxtail? What's wrong?" She paused. "Who's that?"

Foxtail hesitated. "That's Orangepaw."

The orange servant trainee dipped her head, ears dropped back in respect.

"But what's wrong?" insisted Robinpaw.

Foxtail flicked her tail uncertainly. "There's been a meeting." The orange she-cat beside her flicked her tail, uneasy.

"Whatever for?" asked Leopardpaw.

Foxtail swallowed. "There's been a rebellion."

Silence.

The snow still fell on Robinpaw's fur, but she no longer felt joyful or happy.

Instead, it filled her with dread.

Well! That escalated quickly!

Just a couple questions: What did you think of this chapter? The rebellion? FloraClan's religion?

I hope you enjoyed this! Until next chapter!

Dedicated to SandstormM30w for being such a great supporter of this book!

The Rebels

They walked toward the camp with heavy paws.

Robinpaw wasn't sure what to expect-- but she was confident it wouldn't be pleasant...

After all... She shivered, remembering Brownkit's exile. *FloraClan isn't big on mercy.*

Leopardpaw's expression was blank, void of emotion. He seemed calm...too calm.

He refuted that a moment later.

He padded up to her, and the silver trainee detected a small shiver down his back. He was so vulnerable that Robinpaw had to resist laying her tail on his back.

After all, that might be taken as a sign of weakness.

"What...what do you think happened?" he asked shakily.

Robinpaw flicked her tail helplessly looked at her paws. *I don't know. But...but I'm scared to find out...*

Robinpaw suddenly wished that Thrushnose were there, next to her. She needed her strength. But for now, Leopardpaw would have to do.

Heart heavy, she matched her steps with his.

The snow seemed almost suffocating now, though it was still falling ever lightly. Every flake seemed to weigh down Robinpaw and her companions until she almost didn't want to move.

What's waiting there...? she wondered.

She looked up suddenly as she heard the rushing of water ahead. *So the river isn't frozen yet*, she thought dimly. *Isn't that strange.*

She sunk her claws deeply into the tree trunk as they crossed the river, as usual, but her mind was far away from the usual danger. Instead, her thoughts were consumed by images of blood, and death...and *Tankit.*

Her paws made imprints on the snow as she walked-- pawprints that seemed oddly larger than she remembered. She'd grown a lot in a season...

"Robinpaw?" Foxtail's mew was soft but urgent, and she glanced up to see herself almost walk straight into a tree. She felt a flush of embarrassment, but simply looked up and kept walking.

They were almost there now, she could hear the anxious mew of her Clanmates ahead.

They entered the camp, where FloraClan was gathered under the Great Tree. The three Hunters and the Servant fought through the crowd to see what was happening and there, at the foot of the tree, were Crowclaw and Swallowtooth.

And pinned underneath them were a silver tom and a brown-she cat, both struggling to escape.

Robinpaw's mind was whirling. *What had happened?*

Thrushnose was suddenly by her side, her tail wrapped around Robinpaw comfortingly. The silver she-cat leaned against her thankfully, then turned to speak to her. "What happened?"

Thrushnose opened her mouth to speak before shutting it abruptly and gesturing to the Tree. Marigoldflower made eye contact with Orangepaw, who nodded slightly.

It seemed like she was about to find out.

The golden leader stepped forward and lifted her tail, quieting the hubbub of voices.

"FloraClan," boomed Marigoldflower, "we are gathered here to witness the trial of a rebellious cat of FloraClan and his accomplice." She glanced down disdainfully at the cats in question. "Silverfur of the Den of Servants and a rogue...what's her name? *Mud?* How fitting."

Purrs escaped the cats below, but they were tinged with fear or anger, she couldn't tell which.

"These cats," mewed Oakbranch, "have tried to injure and kill two of our Lesser Leader Trainees. They have also been involved in a forbidden relationship." He spat at them with contempt and they flinched slightly.

Beside her, Robinpaw could've sworn she heard a strangled gasp from her mentor.

"We also have reason to suspect that there are others." His eyes scanned the gathered cats coldly, and Robinpaw felt her claws dig into the snow-covered ground. She quickly re-sheathed them. *Don't want to look suspicious.*

"Irispaw and Orchidpaw, come forward."

Robinpaw's heart seized as her sister walked forward, shaking slightly as she glared as menacingly as she could at the two trapped cats. Orchidpaw beside her did likewise, but with a hint of smugness.

Irispaw?

Fear for her sister gripped Robinpaw-- had the cats in question tried to attack her? Did they *dare* to try and hurt a Lesser Leader?

Nobody messes with my littermate! she thought fiercely. She bared her teeth at the unfamiliar cat and the silver tom she assumed was a Servant. *You deserve whatever you get!*

"Irispaw and Orchidpaw went on a walk in the territory when these two cats attacked them. Fortunately, they had been accompanied by Crowclaw--" Here, he dipped his head to the black tom-cat, who inclined his head slightly in response. "--and the aggressors were

compromised." He turned to Irispaw and Orchidpaw. "Speak."

Irispaw shivered violently, her fur bushed up in terror. She shook her head mutely, and Orchidpaw spoke. "They...they came out of nowhere. We were just walking, minding our own business, when..." She froze as well, then sat down heavily, a tremor going through her. "They..." She tried again. "They..."

Marigoldflower nodded sympathetically and gestured for her to be silent. Orchidpaw subsided with a grateful nod.

Heatherblossom stepped forward and curled her tail around Irispaw, baring her teeth. "What do you have to say for yourselves, scum?!" she hissed with an intensity mirroring one of a mother-- she deeply cared for Irispaw, Robinpaw realized. Irispaw probably *was* a daughter to her.

Robinpaw felt her claws unsheathe in defense of her littermate. She found herself calling out "Yeah! What do you have to say?"

The she-cat, *Mud*, tried to choke something out, but Swallowtooth pushed down hard on her windpipe. She coughed once violently, then fell silent.

"Kill them! Kill them! Kill them! Kill them!"

The silver trainee couldn't tell where the chant had begun, but it spread like a wildfire. She found herself repeating it as well, despite her fear of blood, despite her fear of death.

The snow swirled down, seemingly oblivious of that anger and insanity taking place. It fell silently, steadily, and seemed to already be pink with blood.

NO ONE messes with my sister! I won't lose another littermate!

Marigoldflower didn't even bother quieting the crowd, simply yowled over it. "And FloraClan does not condone this! We shall *not* let these cats live!"

"Kill them! Kill them! Kill them! Kill them!"

The chant had risen to a peak that seemed impossible, and Robinpaw's mew was growing hoarse from the volume she was yowling at.

They deserve to DIE!

She glared at them with fierce animosity, the unfamiliar she-cat and inferior Servant who'd *dared* to hurt her sister. She noted, then, suddenly, the absolute terror in their eyes, and the mist cleared from her eyes for a moment.

Had they really attacked Irispaw? Neither she nor her friend had a visible scratch on them...

But the other cats didn't seem to care, they yelled their anger to the sky. Robinpaw hesitated for a moment before finally seeing the injury, a deep cut along Irispaw's back.

They had *hurt her!*

They made her bleed!

Memories of the cut along her own back flooded through her, adding fuel to Robinpaw's anger. It burned brighter and brighter until the mist returned again, staining her vision red.

"Kill them! Kill them! Kill them! Kill them!"

Robinpaw's voice joined the rest once again.

Irispaw huddled closer to her mentor.

She was only faintly aware of the nod of Marigoldflower's head.

Swallowtooth and Crowclaw bit down, hard.

Two screams of pain.

The white snow was stained a deep red.

A scent of blood and death cut through the air.

"Long live FloraClan!" the Clan cheered.

The two broken bodies lay limply, terror imprinted forever in their gazes.

For maybe a moment, Robinpaw hesitated. *Is a scratch really deserving of two deaths?*

If it's my littermate...

Robinpaw cheered with them.

Wow.

What did you think, guys? This affect your opinion about FloraClan?

Any theories? (About anything in this chapter)

Till next chapter!

~Ember

Dedicated to RavenFeather_TC and special thanks NightFrost_WC for editing this chapter for me!

The Willow

Robinpaw felt sick.

The anger and fury she'd felt earlier had faded, to be replaced with a chilling realization that she'd seen two cats die.

In front of her.

And she hadn't done anything to help.

Foxtail had, kindly, given her the day off. She knew how much this would affect Robinpaw, and she couldn't have been more right.

The silver she-cat sighed from her place along the rock wall of the den, shivering violently.

I didn't help them...I didn't help them...just like Tankit...I'm a terrible cat...

"Robin? Robinpaw?"

Robinpaw met the eyes of her closest friend. "Hi, Thrushnose," she sighed.

Thrushnose sat down next to her. "You need to stop blaming yourself," she mewed.

Robinpaw just flicked her tail. "How can I do that, when I didn't even try to stop it?"

"They would've killed them anyway!"

Robinpaw winced at Thrushnose's blunt words, but knew she was right. No matter what she'd done, they would've died. The only difference was she might have been killed with them.

"I don't want you to die," mewed Thrushnose softly, burying her nose in Robinpaw's fur. Robinpaw felt her fur grow suddenly hot.

"I don't either," she whispered back, pressing her nose into hers.

They stayed like that for a bit, jumping suddenly when Rowantwig and his trainee walked by. "Well, well, well, what do we have here?"

Robinpaw's blood ran cold. It must look like...he must think that...

Willowpaw turned to his mentor. "A forbidden relationship?"

"It seems so," replied Rowantwig.

Thrushnose glared at him. "Of course not, you idiot," she mewed. "We're just friends."

Robinpaw felt a pang run through her heart. *Does she really not care about me?*

"Robinpaw was sure she felt blood on her fur; I was just helping her." She lowered her voice. "Suppressed memories from Testing."

Rowantwig nodded in understanding. "I see. There seem to be a lot of those..." He started walking away, before stopped and turning back. "Go to Moonblaze if it gets too bad."

Thrushnose dipped her head. "Understood."

Suppressed memories?

"Come on, Willowpaw!"

Robinpaw then noticed, suddenly, that Willowpaw hadn't moved. He was facing her, mouth open like he wanted to speak, but shut it abruptly and followed this mentor.

Huh. That was strange...

Thrushnose's words seemed to claw across her face.

Was *that* how little she cared about her?

She stalked away angrily toward her den.

"Robinpaw! Wait!"

It was too late. Robinpaw collapsed onto her moss bed and wrapped her tail around her eye.

Save it, Thrushnose. It's not like you even care about me.

Somehow, she managed to fall asleep.

~----------~

"Robinpaw? Robinpaw, wake up!"

Robinpaw's eyes blinked open at the voice of her over-excited denmate, annoyance coursing through her as she noted the darkness outside.

"What?" she snapped angrily, lowering her voice so she didn't wake the others. Tired as she was, she wouldn't wake others for her denmate's stupidity.

"Come outside," he mewed. His voice wasn't bright and bubbly, which struck Robinpaw as strange. In fact, even the purr that followed it seemed forced, and his eyes were downcast.

"Fine," she mumbled, curiosity piqued. She rose from her nest and followed the golden tom out of the den. She blinked a couple times to wake up a bit, then quickly followed her companion out of the camp exit.

There, waiting, was Willowpaw.

Robinpaw blinked a couple times to make sure the dark wasn't getting her-- but it *was* Willowpaw. Unmistakeably.

What in the name of the Sun and Moon?

Leopardpaw had slipped away without her noticing, and she was suddenly wistful for someone, *anyone* to be with her. Willowpaw was...staring at her funny.

"Follow me."

Robinpaw hesitated for a moment, before remembering that he was a Lesser Leader. That was an order-- and order she had to obey.

She followed him.

Robinpaw heard the river gurgling nearby, and a bout of worry stole through her before she realized they were two fox-lengths away. Still, if he hadn't know where he was going...

"Willowpaw?" she mewed. "Where are we going?"

Willowpaw just purred. "You'll see."

Robinpaw rolled her eyes, but continued following. With a sudden start, she realized he was leading her to the pond. *Why...?*

Sure enough, Robinpaw heard the river's roar fade into a gentle trickle as Willowpaw stopped and sat down on a rock on the pond's edge. Robinpaw reluctantly joined him.

"Isn't it so pretty?" he mewed.

Robinpaw closed her eyes, letting the music of the river wash over her. "Yes," she sighed. She may not know Willowpaw, but he wasn't wrong about that.

She suddenly had the most uncomfortable sensation that he was staring at her, and a quick glance showed that she was indeed right.

"But not as pretty as you," he mewed. His tail found hers and tried to twine with it, but Robinpaw pulled it away.

From any other cat, Robinpaw might have considered this cute. But something about his voice...how he looked at her when he'd said it...

It wasn't normal, that was for sure.

Robinpaw stayed silent, not returning any sort of compliment, The silence grew longer until Willowpaw seemed to no longer stand it, and a sudden flow of words left his mouth.

"Robinpaw, you're so pretty and beautiful and your fur is so shiny and soft...the way the sun catches your fur makes it shine...and you...you..."

He paused, his breathing growing quicker. Robinpaw inched slowly away from him-- he hadn't said a single thing about her personality--

"I love you!" he blurted. "I love you and I wish we weren't trainees so I could claim you and make you mine and--"

Now Robinpaw made her disturbance no secret. *Claim her?!* Thousands of thoughts crowded in her head, thoughts of disgust, fear and a flash of white fur. They spun and spun as she tried to grasp unto one, but they refused to cooperate and instead created a disjointed picture.

Now the words spilled out of Robinpaw's mouth, a jumbled mess she was sure had no meaning. "But no I don't love you...I mean I don't hate you but I don't love you...and Th-"

Willowpaw's eyes narrowed as he saw her backing away. "But I love you Robinpaw! And no one's here..."

No, no, no...

A look of madness and want filled Willowpaw's yellow eyes, and Robinpaw was running, running faster than she ever had in her life--

And then a sharp pain on her shoulders, a weight on her as her Clanmate landed upon her. The look of possession was there once more, and all Robinpaw knew was that she wouldn't let anyone do this to her-- not ever--

"Robinpaw..." It was a hiss, yet one of desire and want, that came out of his mouth. Adrenaline coursed through her blood, and this time Robinpaw embraced it.

As Willowpaw hissed again, Robinpaw suddenly turned so that her belly was facing him. Her claws unsheathed with a *shink*, and Robinpaw did something she swore long ago she'd never do.

Her claws sliced across his face, yet she felt nothing-- no terror, no guilt. She didn't even hear his shriek of pain as he released her, knew nothing but the pounding of her feet through the forest.

She was in the den-- how had she gotten there?-- and ran for her moss. She paused, almost about to sleep, then terror coursed through her once more-- what if he did something while she slept?

After all...he was a Leader. No one could stop him.

Robinpaw was tearing through the forest once more, now with the moss in her jaws, and stopped only when her legs no longer held her. She dropped her moss, then collapsed, shaking, onto it.

For a moment her eyes refused to close, consumed by the image of mad yellow eyes, but exhaustion soon overcome her terror, and her limp form lay inert on the moss.

Dramaaa

What can I say? I like crushing readers' hearts >:)

What did you think of Robinpaw's behavior? Willowpaw? Anything else?

Anyway, hope you liked this chapter and hope you are having a great spring break! (I'm writing from Vegas)

~[Evil] Ember

The Assessment

[image]

"Robinpaw?"

Robinpaw shot bolt upright in her nest, noticing abruptly how shredded it was from her desperate dash through the forest. The voice she'd heard had been distant, perhaps only her imagination, but she dared not reply in fear that it was Willowpaw searching for her.

"Robinpaw?"

Now she was sure she wasn't imaging it-- a mew of concern and worry was indeed coming from somewhere nearby. It was female, though, that she was sure of. She worried, though, that it was just another Lesser Leader, trying to catch her off-guard...

"Robinpaw? Where are you?"

Robinpaw's heart leapt as she recognized the voice-- Thrushnose! Her anger at her seemed silly and petty now. Nothing seemed that big of a deal anymore...not after *that*...

"Thrushnose?!" Robinpaw yelled. "Where are you?"

"Here," she mewed, coming into view.

Robinpaw barrelled into her, sinking her nose into her fur.

"By the Sun and Moon, I was worried," sighed Thrushnose.

"I'm alright." Well, that was only partly true...but she'd fill in Thrushnose later.

"I hate to break up this adorable reunion," came another voice, causing Robinpaw to back away and look sharply toward its owner, "but Robinpaw's got an assessment to do."

"Foxtail!"

"Of course," purred her mentor. "I was worried too-- though maybe not as much as Thrushnose here. She looked ready to rip apart anyone who'd hurt you."

"Shut up," muttered Thrushnose.

"Really?" Robinpaw looked at her white-furred denmate with something akin to pride and admiration.

"I'm just glad you're safe."

Robinpaw purred and buried herself once more in Thrushnose's fur before Foxtail's cough broke them apart once more. "Assessment?"

"Oh, right." Robinpaw reluctantly left Thrushnose's side and turned to her mentor. "Wait, assessment?"

Foxtail purred. "It's been eight moons, Robinpaw. You're going to be a full member."

~----------~

Tree hunting.

Fishing.

Bird hunting.

Injuries.

The four stages of her assessment.

Robinpaw felt a shaft of worry cut through her unconcernedness, which more than one full member had told her she'd need. She pushed it aside hurriedly.

I can do this.

First, tree hunting.

Robinpaw spotted a sturdy-looking oak and sunk her claws into it

immediately, ignoring the resulting pain from her claws. She'd chosen one of the hardest trees in the forest to climb.

So maybe she was showing off a bit. But tree hunting *was* her favorite.

She crept carefully up the tree, keeping as close to the trunk as possible. Her ears swiveled, on the alert for any rustle or bit of sound.

There!

Some sort of animal-- a squirrel, perhaps-- had made its presence known by brushing against a leaf not far above her. It had been a bit to her right, and Robinpaw adjusted her course accordingly.

A limb now stretched out almost directly above her head, and Robinpaw felt a surge of pride in her hearing skills. Moving just enough to gain access to the branch, Robinpaw stepped carefully unto it, hoping that her weight wouldn't move it.

It didn't-- fortunately, the branch was quite strong.

The squirrel was not more than a tail-length in front of her, easy jumping distance. She crouched silently and leapt, silencing the creature forever with a bite to the neck.

Robinpaw now leaned over the edge of the branch, studying the ground below her. *Is it too far to drop? The ground isn't* too *hard, but it might not seem professional to drop it.*

Best to carry it down.

She inched cautiously down, careful not to lose her grip on it for an instant. Her tail was straight down below her, and she felt its tip touch the ground.

She leapt, landing squarely on all fours.

Carefully burying the squirrel, she prepared for the second stage of the assessment.

Fishing.

For this, Robinpaw mused as she set out toward the river, *Foxtail had specified that I'd need to catch more than one fish.*

And it wasn't like Robinpaw was *fantastic* at fishing. Nor was she bad, either, but she wasn't *exceptional.*

This would be one of her hardest challenges yet.

The gurgling if water informed her that she'd reached the river and a feeling of anticipation filled her. She imagined Thrushnose's fishing lessons and quickly walked to the side if the river farthest from the sun.

Now she just had to wait.

The silver tabby studied the water carefully, alert for any movement, any flash of scales.

A gleam of silver upstream.

Instantly, Robinpaw's paw was in the water. A fish wiggled frantically on the bank not a moment later, its movement ceased when Robinpaw whacked it solidly on the head.

That's one.

She watched the ripples caused by her paw fade, and the fish began to swim by again.

Her paw entered the water, but the fish swerved and avoided it.

Foxdung. She'd lunged too early.

The fish didn't seem daunted, continuing to swim down confidently. She chose a large one, and...

Thwack!

This time, the fish was dead almost the moment it left the water. Robinpaw purred in satisfaction, quickly burying her two fish.

Bird hunting.

This would probably be the most time-consuming stage. The scarcity of birds was no secret.

Nevertheless, Robinpaw was confident her hearing wouldn't let her down.

She headed toward the place she knew was home to the few birds that lived in FloraClan territory.

The grove she was heading for had been dubbed "Miracle Grove" by the senior hunters. She'd only learned of its existence today as a word of advice from Kestrelwing.

It had been strange, no question, that Kestrelwing had helped her at all. Robinpaw had always thought that her mother didn't care about her.

But perhaps she did.

Maybe acting indifferent was how she had to protect herself.

The twitter of a bird interrupted Robinpaw from her thoughts, reminding her that she was here to hunt, not muse over her mother's possible care for her.

The twitter came again, and Robinpaw identified the bird as a robin.

How appropriate, she thought wryly. *You, my friend, will help me become a full member.*

Now, where are you?

Scanning the trees carefully, Robinpaw caught sight of a dull brown among the green of new-leaf.

Gotcha!

The robin swooped down to eat something on the first floor-- seeds, Robinpaw guessed, as those were plentiful this time if year.

Robinpaw leapt.

With the silence drilled into her by Foxtail's relentless critiques, Robinpaw's back legs pushed off the ground. The bird didn't even have time to let out a cry of alarm before it was silenced forever by Robinpaw's jaws.

Robinpaw dropped the limp creature proudly, burying it with a sort of smugness.

But now it was time for the final stage-- the one every hunter dreaded.

Injuries.

That word by itself didn't fully capture what this stage was, what it meant.

It was hunting with an injury.

It was part of the assessment because even if a hunter was injured, they still had to hunt.

It was their job, after all.

Fortunately, the trainees weren't *really* injured. They just had to pretend they were.

And it wasn't as if they could cheat, either. They were watched at all times.

Reluctantly, Robinpaw let her hind leg drag behind her, wincing at the slight rustle it made as it inevitably brushed against the undergrowth.

You can do this.

She listened, smelled and watched carefully for any kind of prey. There was none.

She looked back at her dragging hind leg. *Can I maybe just limp...?*

But she couldn't. Robinpaw remembered the rules specifically stating that her hind leg was to *drag* behind her.

So instead, Robinpaw focused on making sure the dead weight made as little noise as possible.

She was almost about to give up hope when a squeak and a flash if brown alerted Robinpaw to a mouse's presence.

Finally!

Unfortunately, with her hind leg incapitated, she wouldn't be able to jump.

She'd have to stalk until she was practically on top of it.

Robinpaw felt her heart rate increase, but made a conscious effort not to breathe heavily. She crept forward...one step...two...

Somehow, she'd manged to creep impossibly close to the mouse. She was downwind, but still...

That mouse had no sense of smell.

Robinpaw's paw flashed out and snagged the mouse. It let out a squeak of terror before Robinpaw managed to silence it.

She dropped the mouse, her breath coming heavily.

It took her a moment to grasp what had just happened.

She'd done it!

The assessment was over!

Foxtail and Thrushnose slipped out from the trees, congratulating her warmly as Robinpaw walked in a sort of daze.

I did it!

Even as she thought that, though, Willowpaw's face flashed in her mind.

She shivered.

Four more moons.

Four more moons before he can claim me.

WOO! Another chapter!

And no, I'm not going to do an April Fools. I'm nice that way ;)

What do y'all think Robinpaw's full member name will be?
What did you think of the assessment?

One more chapter and we're 2/3 of the way through the book!

~Ember

P.S.: That pic is what I imagine Robinpaw as :)

The Ceremony

Robinpaw had a permanent purr in her throat as she headed toward the Great Tree.

She was going to be a full member.

She was going to get her full name.

Ever since she'd returned from her assessment, she'd been stuck somewhere between excitement and nervousness.

She was going to be a full member.

A *full member*.

The meeting had already been called, this time by Lilyflower, which struck the silver tabby as a bit unusual.

Of course, she was *my Tester. Perhaps that's it...?*

Robinpaw was suddenly joined at the front if the crowd by her littermates-- one cream and another grey. *Oh, of course. They're becoming full members today as well...*

She, however, was the only one for whom her name would be a surprise.

Irispaw will be Irisblossom, Greypaw will be Greyfur...

But me? I could be Robin-anything.

She turned to look back at the still-chattering crowd, and picked out Thrushnose and Foxtail immediately. Foxtail nodded at her encouragingly while Thrushnose waved her tail energetically.

She's just as excited as I am, thought Robinpaw, amused.

"We gather today to welcome three young cats as full members of

FloraClan," mewed the light grey she-cat.

Robinpaw turned to face the Great Tree, whose leaves were only just starting to bud. She made eye contact with Lilyflower, who looked at her with something akin to pride.

"Greypaw, step forward."

Robinpaw's littermate stepped forward, his steps faltering slightly in excitement.

"Oh, Sun and Moon, the givers of light and life, look down upon me to approve my choice. Greypaw, you have proved an excellent contributor to the Den of Servants. Whitefur, is your trainee Greypaw prepared to take on the role of a full member of the Den of Servants?"

Whitefur nodded. "He is ready, Leader of the Flowers."

"Then by the power granted to me by my position, I give you your name. Greypaw, from this moment on, your name shall be Greyfur. The Den of Servants welcomes you as a full member."

Greyfur stepped back, pride shining in his eyes.

He didn't look extremely hopeful however, but Robinpaw couldn't blame him. After all, he didn't have a ton to look forward too.

He was just a Servant, and always would be.

"Irispaw, step forward."

The cream she-cat stepped forward with a slight spring in her step. Robinpaw felt jealous at her sister's happiness before quickly smothering the unworthy feeling with pride.

She should be *proud* of her littermate-- the she-cat that would soon become a full member.

"Oh, Sun and Moon, the givers of light and life, look down upon me to approve my choice. Irispaw, you have proved an excellent contributor to the Den of Lesser Leaders. Your excellent problem-

solving skills are held in the highest regard by every member of FloraClan. Heatherblossom, is your trainee Irispaw prepared to take on the role of a full member of the Den of Lesser Leaders?"

Heatherblossom inclined her head. "She is ready, Leader of the Flowers."

"Then by the power granted to me by my position, I give you your name. Irispaw, from this moment on, your name shall be Irisblossom. The Den of Lesser Leaders welcomes you as a full member."

Irisblossom was practically bursting with excitement when she stepped back. She exchanged an excited glance with Robinpaw, who returned it hesitantly.

"Robinpaw, step forward."

Her belly seemed to be filled with birds and bugs as she obeyed, her legs threatening to buckle under her in excitement.

This is it.

She glanced back to Thrushnose and Foxtail for encouragement. They both waved their tails in encouragement while Foxtail edged closer to the front.

"Oh, Sun and Moon, the givers of light and life, look down upon me to approve my choice. Robinpaw, you have proved an excellent contributor to the Den of Hunters and Warriors. Your excellent listening and climbing skills are held in the highest regard by every member of FloraClan. Foxtail, is your trainee Robinpaw prepared to take on the role of a full member of the Den of Hunters and Warriors?"

Foxtail's voice almost seemed to shake as she replied. "She is ready, Leader of the Flowers."

"Then by the power granted to me by my position, I give you your name. Robinpaw, from this moment on, your name shall be Robinear, in honor of your acute hearing and silence climbing trees. The Den of Hunters and Warriors welcomes you as a full member."

The spell of silence that had seemed to hang over the Clan was suddenly broken as all the cats began calling their names-- their *full* names. Robinear noted with unease, however, that Willowpaw was calling her name loudest of all.

Well, second to Thrushnose, perhaps.

The words about the three of them guarding the leaders seemed to be lost in the crowd, though it was probably just as loud as always.

Thrushnose was at her side, purring, and Foxtail was simply saying congratulations over and over. Leopardpaw came to her side and congratulated her as well, along with Bearpaw, who Robinear had barely spoken to.

Scanning the crowd for her littermates, she saw Irisblossom surrounded by admirers and Greyfur receiving a loving congratulations by Fawnfur.

Those two will be mates before the sun's down, purred Robinear.

Everything seemed to blur together in a mess of movement and noise, and the newly named Robinear couldn't say she was sorry for the hubbub to die down.

Once it did, however, she headed almost immediately to Gingerfur. The ginger she-cat turned, confused, then brightened when she saw who it was.

"Robinp-ear! How are you?"

"Pretty good," replied Robinear. "But, uh, there is something I'd like to talk to you about..." She'd lowered her voice considerably now, and glanced anxiously back to Thrushnose. Thankfully, the beautiful white she-cat was engrossed in a conversation with Greyfur.

"Yes?"

Robinear gulped. "Well, Willowpaw approached me last night..."

Gingerfur winced. "That's all you need to say. I'm assuming that's

what the lovely claw marks on his face are from?"

Robinear nodded mutely.

"You...got away, didn't you?" Gingerfur glanced at Robinear in concern.

"Yes, yes," Robinear hastened to assure her. "I got away. But I'm worried...I mean, he *is* a Lesser Leader..."

Gingerfur shrugged helplessly. "I'm sorry, Robinear. There's nothing I can do. Just hope that a decent tom claims you."

Robinear sighed. "As if."

Gingerfur purred. "Cheer up! Even I was claimed!"

"Wait, what?"

Gingerfur purred and shoved Robinear aside. "Now, shoo. Go to your future mate."

Robinear was shoved forcefully into Thrushnose, and she felt her fur grow hot. "She's not--"

Thrushnose purred. "I'm not what?"

"Nothing..."

Thrushnose frowned. "What were you talking to Gingerfur about, anyway?" She paused and tilted her head. "Did it have to do with last night?"

Robinear nodded. "Yes...well, uh, Willowpaw..."

She launched into the story, Thrushnose interjecting often with hisses. Robinear found it hard to keep going after Thrushnose began grooming her, but somehow had the strength to continue.

By the end, the beautiful she-cat looked ready to rip Willowpaw apart. "How *dare* he!" she hissed, fur bristling. "His *dare* he!"

Robinear winced. "The other problem is...well, he'll probably claim

me as soon as he becomes a full member."

Thrushnose began pacing angrily, and Robinear noted absently that the ready of the Clan had retreated to their dens.

"What can we do?" she hissed, still pacing.

Robinear sighed. "We can't do anything."

Thrushnose sat down with an audible *thump*.

"We'll just have to hope."

The sun cast its last rays over the tree tops before sinking, and Robinear walked over to join her littermates guarding the den.

Thrusting aside her worries about Willowpaw, Robinear simply nodded to her siblings and let the joy of receiving her full member name wash over her.

Unfortunately, that feeling was rather diminished.

Look at me! Two chapters in one day!

We're 2/3rds of the way through, folks!

So, questions! What did you think of Robinear's name? Gingerfur? Anything else?

In other news, I created an account called @FloraClanCharacters to let you ask the characters questions! Just post on the message board along with the character's name, to ask. :)

~Ember

The Secret

[image]

As far as Robinear could tell, being a full member wasn't a lot different than being a trainee.

She still hunted, still deferred to the Leaders-- the only difference was that she now has a nest next to Thrushnose.

Not that she was complaining about that part.

The silver tabby yawned and stretched, then looked around for a hunting partner. Another difference between full members and trainees: trainees didn't have a minimum amount of prey to bring in. Full members did.

Thrushnose was still sleeping, and Robinear didn't really want to wake her. Instead, she made eye contact with Quailwhisker, who nodded. The two she-cats walked out of the den before beginning a conversation.

"Where do you want to go?" Quailwhisker asked.

Robinear flicked her tail. "I don't know...we should probably check with the Leaders, though. See if they have any prey requests."

Quailwhisker nodded in agreement, quickly walking toward the two Leader's dens, Robinear at her tail.

"Yes?" Marigoldflower poked her head out of the female Leader's den.

"Quailwhisker and Robinear, going on a hunt, Leader of the Flowers." Quailwhisker dipped her head in respect. "Do you have any prey requests?"

Marigoldflower paused, then turned back into the den. "Any requests?"

There was a pause before someone called back: "Birds?"

Robinear bit back a sigh of disappointment. Birds? We'll be out there all day...

Marigoldflower nodded. "Birds." She saw them turn toward the male Leader's den, and hurriedly added: "They're in here too. Just birds."

Robinear and Quailwhisker nodded and turned away from the den. They left the camp and headed toward Miracle Grove.

"Birds," grumbled Quailwhisker. "Why birds?"

Robinear flicker her tail. "They just wanted some, I guess."

Quailwhisker sighed. "I suppose."

They lapsed into a comfortable silence, simply walking toward the grove.

Finally, Robinear felt the urge to break it. "Where's Owltalon?"

Quailwhisker turned to face her, seeming surprised by the question. "Oh, he's guarding the Lesser Leader's den."

"Oh." A pause, then: "Is he the reason you were so grumpy during training?"

Quailwhisker ducked her head and nodded. "Partly. But the main reason..." She suddenly fell silent, gesturing toward Miracle Grove.

Birdsong.

They were both dead silent as they approached the grove, paws barely seeming to brush the ground.

The key to being silent, Robinear thought, was trying to not touch the ground.

She heard the birdsong again, and she swivled her ears, trying to pin its location. Quailwhisker, on the other paw, had her nose twitching. She was trying to scent it.

The bird twittered again, and Quailwhisker and Robinear's heads both turned to the creature in unison. Robinear nodded slightly in Quailwhisker's direction, and the tortoiseshell crept quietly forward.

In a flutter of feathers, the bird alighted on the ground. It was a swallow, and it pecked insistently at something on the ground.

Robinear was so fascinated by the bird's actions that she nearly forgot Quailwhisker was stalking it. The tortoiseshell hunter leapt and landed squarely on it, then dropped it proudly on the ground.

"Got it!" she crowed, though not very loudly. Hunters were trained to never speak loudly.

Robinear gave her a nod of approval. "Good job!"

Quailwhisker purred. "Thanks." She flicked her tail thoughtfully. "How many more, do you think?"

Robinear bit back a sigh. "Another five, at least." She'd heard at least that many news of approval.

"May the Sun and Moon strike them down," Quailwhisker muttered. "We'll be here all day!"

Robinear's tail drooped, somehow already feeling exhausted. *Isn't that the truth...*

Well, best get to it.

Robinear pricked her ears, listening for birds, and the hunt began.

By unspoken agreement, the two hunters split up to cover more ground. The Miracle Grove was quite large, almost as large as the camp, and Robinear felt tiny among the trees.

Another bird call caught her attention, and the located the culprit quickly. It was a strange bird she'd never seen before-- a large dark grey bird with white tipped feathers and a strange feather sticking out on top.

What in the name of the Sun and Moon is that?

It didn't look that fast, it simply ambled along, snapping up bugs and seeds. But Robinear knew that looks could be deceiving, and treated it like she would any other bird.

She stalked up to it carefully, taking care to make sure her pawsteps made no sound.

She leapt.

The silver tabby only barely snagged the strange bird's wing as it took of with a surprisingly quick reaction. It gave a pitiful squawk before Robinear ended its misery with a bite to the neck.

She dropped it, breathing hard. She turned to see her companion pounce on a jay, the bird barely making a noise.

"Quailwhisker?" she called. "Do you know what this is?"

Quailwhisker padded over, dropping her catches beside her. "Yeah! That's a quail!"

A quail?

"Huh. Never seen one before," replied Robinear.

Quailwhisker nodded. "Yeah, they're pretty rare, and hard to catch! Good job, by the way."

"Thanks." *A quail. You don't see those every day.*

Quailwhisker glanced at the three birds at their feet. "Do you think three is enough?"

Robinear was about to reply when she heard another bird. She held up her tail for silence, then walked swiftly toward the sound.

She spotted it, now, a thrush-- no, two thrushes!-- roosting in the tree.

"Quailwhisker," she hissed, beckoning her forward with her tail.

The tortoiseshell joined her, amber eyes lighting up when she

spotted the bird. "Perfect," she purred.

The first thrush ventured out of the tree cautiously before quickly beginning to eat. Ordinarily, this would be when Robinear pounced, but there was another variable.

The thrush on the ground called out some sort of "all clear" call to their companion in the tree. It fluttered down to join its friend with its meal.

Robinear met Quailwhisker's gaze and nodded slightly. In unison, the two hunters crept forward five steps and pounced.

They both landed squarely on their prey.

Quailwhisker let out a purr of satisfaction. "Five should be enough, don't you think?"

Robinear nodded before she realized something. "But it's three pieces of prey per hunter," she sighed.

Quailwhisker flicked her tail. "Just catch a mouse or something on the way back."

Of course. "Good idea."

The two she-cats began walking back to camp, catches just barely held. Quailwhisker had managed to tuck two birds under her chin and held one in her mouth.

Impressive.

After a while, though, Quailwhisker needed a break. She deposited her catches rather unceremoniously on the ground and sat down with a *thump.*

Robinear dropped her catches as well. "You alright?"

Quailwhisker nodded. "Just tired. Can we rest a bit?"

"Sure." Robinear paused a moment, trying to remember what they'd been talking about earlier. "What was that earlier? About Owltalon

being part of the reason you were grumpy?"

Quailwhisker sighed. "Right. Well..." She paused, a pained expression on her face. "You're not the only one who's lost a sibling."

Oh.

Robinear recognized her own sadness reflected in Quailwhisker's eyes. "I'm sorry...who was it?

"His name was Brownkit," Quailwhisker choked. "And I killed him."

A beat.

Robinear resisted the urge to rear back. *Quailwhisker killed her brother?*

"I didn't know what I was doing...my Tester just taught me the killing bite and didn't tell me what it did..." Her new trailed off.

Oh no.

"It wasn't your fault, Quailwhisker. It was the Leader's," Robinear spat, trying to reassure her.

Quailwhisker relaxed. "You're right."

Then she realized what she'd said.

This could be considered treason.

Quailwhisker looked at her in terror, and they both looked around frantically for anyone who might have overheard. The tension drained from their bodies when they saw nothing.

Robinear shuddered. "I shouldn't have said that." She paused, then added, "But I meant it."

Quailwhisker nodded. "Me too."

The two picked up their prey and walked back to camp in silence, their treasonous words hanging between them.

I've committed treason. Treason.

Why do I feel like it's right?

New chapter here! Hope you enjoyed!

What did you think of Quailwhisker's revelation? Do you agree with Robinear? Any predictions?

Oh, and thank you for the comments on FloraClanCharacters xD Willowpaw is getting offended by all the death threats.

Until next chapter!

~Ember

P.S.: Pic above is how I imagine Greyfur (and yes, I drew it xD)

The Argument

Robinear dropped her prey in the pile and sat down, exhausted.

Her hunting partner that day, Thrushnose, looked at her in concern. "Are you alright? Do you need some rest?"

Robinear shook her head. "I'm fine. You need some, though."

Thrushnose shook her head stubbornly. "No, I don't."

Robinear rolled her eyes. "Sure. I'm going to share some prey with Greyfur, alright?" She began to walk toward her brother, bird already in her mouth.

"Hey! Wait for me!" Thrushnose caught up to her just as the silver tabby sat down next to Greyfur.

He purred. "You guys are so cute!"

Robinear ducked her head. "I could say the same about you and Fawnfur!" she teased. The two servants had their tails twined as they shared a mouse. "When are you two going to be expecting kits?"

Fawnfur swatted her with her tail and snuggled close to Greyfur. "Shut up."

"Speaking of kits..." Thrushnose cut in. "...I think one of our denmates is expecting." She glanced meaningfully in Quailwhisker's direction.

"Really?" Robinear tilted her head. *She doesn't LOOK like she's expecting...but I suppose she was tired yesterday...*

Thrushnose flicked her tail. "It's just a rumor I heard."

"When did you become such a gossip?" Robinear purred.

Thrushnose rolled her eyes. "I always have been."

Robinear paused, considering. "True."

She took a bite of her bird and savored it, then shoved it over to Thrushnose. "Want some?"

Thrushnose didn't even reply, just took a bite. "Thanks," she mumbled through the bird.

Robinear purred. "You're welcome."

"Hey," Fawnfur mewed suddenly. "I think that one tom is staring at you, Robinear." She was gesturing to someone over the silver tabby's shoulder.

Robinear exhaled sharply, but didn't look over. "Please don't tell me it's Willowpaw."

Thrushnose looked over her shoulder and sighed. "It is." She hissed. "I'm going to claw his face up until it's unrecognizable!"

"Whoa, calm down." Robinear smoothed down Thrushnose's fur with her tail. *Though I wouldn't object to that idea.*

Thrushnose shrugged off Robinear's tail and stalked over to Willowpaw, fur bristling. Robinear started to run after her, but was stopped by a weight in her tail.

She whipped around to see Greyfur sitting firmly on it. "You'll just make it worse."

Robinear sighed. *He's right.* Sitting down, tail still pinned, Robinear prayed to the Sun and Moon that Thrushnose wouldn't get hurt.

"Why are you staring at Robinear?" Straight and to the point--Thrushnose's style.

Willowpaw purred and curled his tail around his paws. "Well, why not?"

Thrushnose seemed to struggle to contain a hiss. "Because it's

creepy, that's why!"

Willowpaw uncurled his tail and flicked it dismissively. "Creepy, not creepy. Whatever. I can do what I want."

His eyes seemed to send another message: *I can claim whoever I want.*

Thrushnose hissed. "Stay away from her!"

Willowpaw purred again. "Careful, careful. Cats might think you have a *forbidden relationship*."

"W-we're just...just *friends*!" Thrushnose seemed to choke on the word.

"Sure. Now, I'll get back to watching Robinear, ok?"

Suddenly, a golden tom stalked over to stand at Thrushnose's side.

Leopardpaw?

Robinear took advantage of everyone's surprise to break free of Greyfur's hold and pull Thrushnose back.

"You stay away from her. She clearly doesn't like you, and this isn't helping." Leopardpaw confronted his brother, tail flickering.

Willowpaw glared at his littermate. "What's it to you?" He paused, then added: "You clearly like her as well."

Leopardpaw scowled. "Well, maybe, but I care enough to not take her by force!"

Willowpaw snorted. "Weak."

"Do you want to test that, you spoiled, fat lump of--"

"Stop!" Robinear burst out. "This is ridiculous! Just calm down, both of you." *Especially you, Willowpaw.*

Willowpaw sniffed haughtily. "This isn't your business."

Robinear nearly snapped a retort, but Thrushnose's tail in her mouth muffled it. "No sense in making it any worse," she murmured.

Robinear sighed but subsided, albeit with a couple muttered curses directed at Willowpaw.

Now Willowpaw turned back to Leopardpaw. "Besides, she already is mine." He gestured toward his clawed face with his tail.

Robinear's blood ran cold. *Was he insinuating...oh by the darkness NO...*

"Would you like another wound to match it?" she hissed, unsheathing her claws. This time, Thrushnose didn't hold her back, and she padded forward to stand beside Leopardpaw.

Willowpaw took half a step backward. "You wouldn't dare," he mewed, though he didn't sound certain.

"Try me," Robinear hissed. She felt angry enough that her fear of blood was pushed to the back of her mind.

Right now, she felt she'd be able to really draw blood.

She took a threatening step forward.

"What is the meaning of this?!"

Everyone froze.

All of the Leaders had clearly been in a meeting in the Female Leader's Den, and they had just walked out.

To see Robinear threatening a Lesser Leader.

Foxdung .

Robinear hurriedly re-sheathed her claws, wincing as she felt Lilyflower's angry gaze sweep over her.

This isn't what it looks like.

"What's happening?" snapped Oakbranch to Fawnfur.

She flinched but quickly ducked her head in submission. "Leader of the Trees, Willowpaw of the Lesser Leaders was threatening Robinear. Thrushnose and Leopardpaw of the Hunters defended her, before she stepped forward."

Oakbranch turned to Willowpaw. "Trainee?"

Willowpaw dipped his head. "Leader of the Trees, nothing of the sort happened! I was simply admiring the view--" at this, he sent a meaningful glance toward Robinear, "-- when she out of nowhere threatened me!"

Marigoldflower looked to the rest of the Clan. "Is that what happened?"

A frantic shaking of heads.

Marigoldflower looked over the Clan again. "Fine. I'll let this pass...but one more offense..." She glared in Robinear's direction.

Robinear shivered.

With a couple more glares in her direction, the Leaders stalked over to the prey pile.

Thank the Sun and Moon. Robinear breathed a sigh of relief.

She glanced toward Thrushnose, who instantly curled her tail with hers. The silver tabby and thick-furred white she-cat stayed that way for a minute before Robinear yawned loudly.

Thrushnose purred. "To the den you go."

Robinear made a sound of protest. "But I'm not..." her statement was interrupted by another yawn, "...tired."

"Sleep."

"Fine," Robinear sighed, padding into the den and settling on the moss.

She was asleep before Thrushnose could even say "I told you so."

~----------~

Robinear woke up with Thrushnose asleep beside her.

Watching the beautiful she-cat's chest rise and fall, Robinear wondered briefly whether they were, unofficially, mates.

It was the kind of question she could never manage to ask.

She stood there a moment more, then abruptly turned and walked over to the other she-cat in the den.

She hadn't spoken to Finchfeather in a long time-- perhaps since she was a kit. *Does she remember me?*

"Finchfeather?"

The black-and-grey she-cat looked up in surprise, her gaze lighting up when she saw who was talking. "Robinear?"

Well, that answers that *question.*

"Hi! Uh, I just wanted to talk to you about...you know...Willowpaw." Robinear's voice caught there, and Finchfeather's expression fell.

"Oh. I see. Did he...ah...approach you?"

Robinear nodded.

Finchfeather wrinkled her nose. "I'm ashamed that I am his mother," she muttered. Louder, she added: "So, what about it?"

The silver tabby shuffled her feet. "Is there anything you...or I...can do?" She paused. "I mean, you know him better than anyone, so..."

Finchfeather flicked her tail helplessly. "All I can say is...this is not my little Whitekit. They did something...they molded his mind..." She suddenly look on the verge of hysteria, breathing heavily. "What did they do to him?"

Robinear flinched. "I don't know. But I swear I'll find out. This is wrong."

Finchfeather just nodded, taking deep breaths to steady herself. "Thank you, Robinear."

That was when Robinear realized what she said.

By the Sun and Moon, what is wrong with me? she wondered. *This is the second time...*

For the second time in her life, Robinear spoke of treason.

Hello again! We're now on schedule to finish this book by the end of May!

What did you think of Willowpaw, Leopardpaw, and Finchfeather? Of ThrushnoseXRobinear ?

Until Saturday now! (I've been updating like nuts to make up for my inactivity earlier)

~Ember

The Planning

As the four-moon mark inched closer and closer, Robinear's nerves were on edge. She's taken to practically sleeping in Thrushnose's nest, which did help a little.

She just wished her nest wasn't the one closest to the door.

It came as no surprise to her, therefore, that she was often woken by cats going to dirtplace.

Or, in Foxtail's case, to meet a tom.

Robinear could smell his scent on her mentor every time she came back, but decided not to bring it up.

She might be trying to make up for her earlier treasonous statements, but she wouldn't turn her former mentor in.

It was a shock, however, when she wasn't woken by pawsteps, but a whisper.

And the whisper wasn't directed to her.

"Leopardpaw. Leopardpaw, get up!" It was make, but Robinear couldn't identify the speaker. He spoke with a hiss, making his new unrecognizable.

Robinear inhaled deeply, hoping to catch his scent.

Her blood ran cold.

Willowpaw.

Cracking her eyes open, Robinear saw Leopardpaw open his eyes blearily. He blinked twice in quick succession. "Willowpaw? What are you doing here?"

Willowpaw looked nervously around the den. "Not here," he hissed,

gesturing to the den entrance. He ducked through quickly. Leopardpaw followed him, looking bemused.

Robinear made a split-second decision to follow them and crept out of her nest. She put her paws down as lightly as possible, praying that they wouldn't listen for the tell-tale sound of a Hunter's stalk.

She heard voices, and inched closer. She saw a bush and crept up to it, peering through its branch.

"...I know you like Robinear," Willowpaw was saying. "That's why I came to offer sharing her."

What?!

Leopardpaw blinked. "Share?"

Willowpaw nodded. "Yeah. I'll take the first claim, as I outrank you, but then you can have her. And then me...and so on."

"No!" burst out Leopardpaw.

Willowpaw tilted his head. "You don't want her?" He flicked his tail. "Alright then. I guess I'll just get her more..."

Leopardpaw hissed. "Don't do that! She clearly hates you!"

You can say that again.

Willowpaw flicked his tail. "So?"

The golden tom exhaled sharply. "Did it not occur to you, brother, that maybe she doesn't *want* to be your mate?"

"But I do," answered Willowpaw, looking bemused at Leopardpaw's protests.

"You're hopeless," sighed Leopardpaw.

Willowpaw dismissed that with a flick of his tail. "So you don't want her?"

Leopardpaw rolled his eyes. "I'd like her, but I'll respect her feelings.

I'd only claim her if she said I could."

"Which, as you pointed out, is probably never," observed Willowpaw. "Whatever. I'll just take her. Just don't stake a permanent claim on her!"

Leopardpaw sighed. "I'm not agreeing to that. If only to protect her..."

Willowpaw sighed. "Fine. Just don't talk to her about this." He lowered his voice and muttered something in his brother's ear. Leopardpaw's eyes went wide and he looked like his legs would give out under him.

Robinear leaned forward slightly to try and hear it. She brushed the leaves, and they let out what she considered an unnecessarily loud rustle.

Willowpaw's head shot up. "What's that?"

Robinear thanked the Sun and Moon that she was upwind as Willowpaw sniffed the air.

Leopardpaw flicked his tail in dismissal. "Probably just a squirrel." But his nose was twitching, and Robinear felt that he could tell it was indeed a cat.

Willowpaw relaxed. "Right. Of course." He glanced toward the bush nervously, and Robinear didn't dare move. "Let's go back to our dens anyhow. Just to be safe."

Leopardpaw yawned. "You do that. I've got to go to dirtplace."

The white tom nodded and walked to his den. "OK. Just be quiet, I don't want anyone to hear."

"I will," Leopardpaw mewed. He padded past Robinear's bush, but he seemed to purposely avert his eyes as he paused. "Get back to your den," he muttered under his breath. "I don't know who you are, and I don't want to. Just...tell Robinear for me."

He walked quickly toward the dirtplace, and Robinear ran quickly

to her nest and curled up in it. Her chest rose and fell deeply as she tried to simulate deep sleep.

Her tail drifted over Thrushnose's, and she drew comfort from it.

She was suddenly aware of Leopardpaw above her as his scent drenched her nostrils. "I love you," he muttered. "But I'm not too blind to see your heart lies somewhere else."

Robinear's heart melted a little. *That is the sweetest thing anyone's said to me...*

He moved until he was over Thrushnose. "Protect her for me, will you?"

Then he settled down in his own nest. Robinear waited until his breathing was deep and even before she crept out of her moss and out the entrance. She crept carefully toward the Servant's den to ask the only cat she could.

She winced at the cramped nature of the den almost immediately. The cats couldn't even move their tails without whacking someone across the muzzle.

She somehow managed not to step on anyone as she reached her target, the ginger she-cat. She tapped her with her tail, guessing, correctly, that Servants were fairly light sleepers.

Gingerfur got up almost immediately, starting to duck into a bow before she spotted who it was. "Robinear?"

Hey voice seemed impossibly quiet, barely louder than a breath. Robinear didn't trust her own voice, and just wordlessly gestured out of the den.

Gingerfur dipped her head in assent, curiosity shining in her amber gaze.

Robinear picked her way carefully through the maze of tails and limbs once more. Gingerfur followed her gracefully, barely looking down.

Robinear breathed a sigh of relief as she exited the den, and sat down quietly outside of it. Gingerfur quickly joined her, tail swishing in curiosity.

"Well," Robinear began, "Willowpaw was talking to Leopardpaw tonight."

Gingerfur winced. She knew of Robinear's problems with Willowpaw. "What did he say?"

Robinear gulped. "He offered to share me with Leopardpaw."

"By the darkness!" cursed Gingerfur. "He turned him down, right?"

Robinear nodded. "He did. But that means.."

"...that Willowpaw will have more time with you," Gingerfur finished. "I'm sorry, Robinear."

"Is there anything I can do?"

Gingerfur hesitated. "Why are you asking me?"

Robinear flicked her tail. "You're my friend, Gingerfur. Besides, you seem to know a lot about claiming."

"I don't think I'm really one to talk about avoiding claims..." Gingerfur mewed. "...considering I'm in a permanent one."

"Really? Congratulations!"

Gingerfur purred. "I have some little ones coming too," she admitted, patting her stomach with her tail.

"That's awesome, Gingerfur!"

The ginger she-cat purred again. Her expression sobered quickly, though, with her next statement. "You can't really do anything," she sighed.

Robinear sighed. "Thanks anyway, Gingerfur." She started to turn away to go back to sleep.

"Wait!" mewed Gingerfur suddenly.

Robinear stopped in her tracks and turned. "What?"

"If you want my honest opinion..." began Gingerfur. "...I'd accept Leopardpaw's permanent claim if he ever asked."

"What?!"

"Hear me out," Gingerfur pleaded. "I think he wouldn't touch you if he asked." She winked. "I think he'd even let you keep your 'relationship' with Thrushnose."

"I'm not sure..." Robinear mewed. *What if he changes if I do agree? After all, he was quite strange when he first spoke to me...*

Gingerfur sighed. "You asked for my opinion. I gave it."

Robinear nodded. "I'll...consider it."

She padded back to her den, pondering Gingerfur's advice. She did have good points...

Still, she wouldn't approach him herself.

He'd have to come to her.

But after all...who can you trust in this place?

Part of FloraClan was, of course, disguising your true intentions.

It was hard to know what anyone wanted.

Her mind suddenly went to the strange rogue she'd met while hunting. She'd hinted at a rebellion of sorts.

Maybe...

She shook her head. No, she was loyal to FloraClan.

Or was she?

Hi! Ember here with this new chapter!

What did you think about this new development? Opinions on Willowpaw and Leopardpaw? Did Gingerfur give good advice?

News-wise: I've changed the cover and description for this book and released the next three covers. I've decided to make this now *four* books!

Oh, and I started a guidebook on FloraClanCharacters !

Until next Saturday :)

~Ember

The Fishing

It had only been a moon since Robinear had become a full member.

A moon of paranoia and anxiety about Leopardpaw and Willowpaw.

Three moons until she'd belong to one of them.

Despite Gingerfur's reassurances, Robinear couldn't help but distrust the cheery golden tom. Sure, he seemed nice...but seeming and being were two different things.

Especially in FloraClan.

"Robinear?" Her mother's mew cut through the silver tabby's thoughts, and she snapped her head around swiftly.

"Yes?" she answered cautiously.

Kestrelwing met her gaze, then looked at her trainee. "Would you be willing to come with me to teach Leopardpaw a bit of fishing? He's only gone once."

Robinear blinked, considering. The undisputed best fisher was Larkfoot, so it seemed a bit bizarre for *her* to be asked.

Then she realized.

Her mother wanted to speak with her.

Kestrelwing had been released from suspicion three days ago, and seemed to have been deliberately avoiding Robinear since.

Not that she really blamed her.

After all, Robinear *had* testified against her.

"Of course," she mewed, dipping her head slightly to indicate Kesterlwing's seniority.

A look of relief flitted across Kestrelwing's face, and a weight seemed to be lifted off her shoulders. "Thanks," she mewed simply.

Leopardpaw shot Robinear a grateful glance as well, and the silver tabby realized that Leopardpaw didn't feel comfortable around his mentor.

Not exactly strange, considering she'd been his mentor for only three days and been accused of neglective abuse.

"Upstream or downstream?" inquired Robinear, breaking the brief silence between them.

Kestrelwing tilted her head, considering. "Upstream," she decided.

Robinear nodded briefly and stood up, shaking the dirt out of her fur. "Well, let's go then, shall we?"

Kestrelwing bobbed her head and exited the camp clearing quickly, Leopardpaw on her tail. Robinear followed a little behind Leopardpaw, and slowed as they neared the stream.

She dipped her paw in. It was still quite cold-- a symptom of early new-leaf-- but it didn't nearly freeze her paws off like it had on her assessment.

Leopardpaw didn't have to be asked to get on the correct side of the stream this time. He splashed noisily across it, pulling out and shivering violently, splattering water everywhere.

Robinear rolled her eyes and leapt across neatly, her tail barely skimming the water. For some reason, Leopardpaw had crossed the stream at its widest point. Why, she had no clue.

He looked like he regretted it now.

The fishing started slow.

Numbed by the cold water, Robinear's reflexes were dulled. How she'd managed to catch anything on her assessment was beyond her.

Robinear was acutely aware of Kestrelwing, just a couple fox-lengths downstream from her. It felt so very strange to have her mother, the cat that had birthed her then shown no care toward her, hunting beside her and muttering a helpful tip whenever she missed a fish.

It didn't seem to make sense.

Her earlier theory replayed itself in her mind even as she concentrated on catching the trout ambling downstream. Perhaps Kestrelwing had just distanced herself to prevent it from hurting so much if she lost a kit.

Or, in her case, two.

That, of course, raised another question: were they Kestrelwing's first litter of kits? All she knew was that her mother never told them who their father was...leading her to believe it was a temporary claim.

A splash interrupted her thoughts, and she saw Kestrelwing brandish a fish proudly in her jaws, killing it with a swift bite. She dropped it beside her, then returned to the water.

Kestrelwing has an unusual way of fishing, Robinear noted. *She catches the fish with her mouth...*

Wait.

She should probably actually hunt.

Robinear scoured the river, looking as far upstream as she could. A gleam of silver caught her eyes, and she snatched brought it out of the water quickly with her paw. She picked it up as it still wriggled and whacked it solidly against the ground.

It went limp.

Glancing at her mother, Robinear was gratified to see a look of approval there-- something she'd never seen for her in the 21 moons she'd been alive.

Her thoughts returned once more to the theory.

Thinking on it, perhaps Kestrelwing had lost a kit before. That would explain why she was so distant now.

But then why didn't the Testers make it safer...?

Pushing her thoughts aside once more, Robinear scanned the river again. She glimpsed a fish, but it sped by before she could react. Cursing silently, she continued her search and saw another fish.

Splash!

Robinear's paw entered the water and pulled the fish out in one fluid movement, sending it flying out of the water and landing on the soil with a wet *splat*. She brought her paw down on its head quickly, feeling the skull crack.

Leopardpaw stared at her, gaping, and Kestrelwing gave her a nod of approval.

Somehow, that nod meant more to Robinear than an entire Clan of awe-stricken Leopardpaws would.

One more.

Just moments later, Kestrelwing snagged one fish, then another. The fish sat proudly on the shore at Kestrelwing's paws, and Robinear felt a surge of admiration for her mother.

Unfortunately, the ripples caused by her lunges had scared all Robinear's potential prey away, but now they swam back cautiously.

Her gaze focused on one fish, one slightly slower than the rest.

Now!

Her paw shot into the water, but only succeeded in carving a long gash into the fish's side. Robinear hissed and was about to give up when she realize that the fish had lost a fin and couldn't move properly.

Her paw darting down low and pulled the crippled fish out of the water with ease. She put it out of its misery quickly with a whack against the ground, then studied her catch critically. *A bit messy, but not bad.*

Upstream, she heard a jubilant cry as Leopardpaw caught his first fish and whacked it (a bit harder than needed in his excitement) against the ground. "I got it!" he crowed.

"Good job!" called back Robinear. She glanced back down at her catch. The blood made her dizzy for a moment before she reminds herself it was fish blood, not cat blood.

She turned to face Kestrelwing. "Should we head back?"

Kestrelwing shook her head. "Let him catch one more fish," she replied, nodded toward Leopardpaw.

Robinear nodded and sat down, arranging her three catches into a neat pile that would be easy to carry back to camp.

The tree swayed gently as a breeze swept through the air, rustling the bare branches slightly. Robinear noted that the leaves were only just budding-- a shame, considering how beautiful FloraClan was in greenleaf.

Leopardpaw was studying the water intently, his tail swaying slightly without his knowledge. Suddenly, he paw shot out and exited the water with a wiggling fish.

He slammed it violently against the ground, and its wiggling ceased. he dropped it, exhausted, and purred.

"I did it!" he cried. "Finally!" His tail lashed happily, and he almost knocked his catch back into the water.

"Careful!" Robinear cried. Leopardpaw's tail froze immediately, and he look at it bashfully.

"Oops. Sorry," he mewed.

Kestrelwing snorted. "I mean, it would've been you who had to

jump in after it," she pointed out. "Be careful, Leopardpaw."

Leopardpaw's gaze dropped to his paws.

Kestrelwing purred. "It's alright. Why don't we go back to camp so you can show off your catches?"

Leopardpaw's eyes lit up. "Yeah!" He pranced back to camp proudly, his two fish tucked under his jaw and in his mouth. Kestrelwing, though, slower until her pace matched Robinear's. "I'm sorry," she sighed, stopping and dropping her fish on the ground. "I was a terrible mother."

Robeinear flicked her tail and paused, letting the fish in her mouth be placed on the ground. She felt an urge to blurt out the question she'd been thinking all day: *Did it work? Distancing yourself from us?* but knew that even mentioning Brownkit and Tankit would make her break down. Instead, she mewed, "It's ok."

And that was that.

They entered the camp to see the majority of the Clan gathered under the Great Tree. She felt a stab of panic. *What did I miss?*

"...and so, at six moons of age, Greykit and Gingerkit, kits of Tanfur, will begin their Testing."

The worry in her chest faded as she realized that it wasn't a ceremony, just an announcement. Greykit and Gingerkit weren't even there, as was customary for Testees.

The poor kits, though...they had no idea what they were in for.

Oakbranch flicked his tail, dismissing the meeting, and he and the other Leaders landed on the ground one by one and retreated to their dens.

"Robinear!" called a cat to her right suddenly.

The silver tabby turned, purring as she recognized Gingerfur beside her. "Gingerfur! What is it?" she asked curiously.

"Well, I'm going to the nursery," mewed Gingerfur.

"Oh!" Now she remembered Gingerfur's confession earlier. With a sudden sadness, she realized this was a goodbye. Still, she forced her mew to stay cheery and bright. "Who's the father?"

"Birchtwig," purred Gingerfur dreamily.

Birchtwig. A Lesser Leader. It wasn't unheard of for Lesser Leaders to take claims from the Servants, but they were rarely permanent. Gingerfur, though, was clearly in love.

"That's awesome!" exclaimed Robinear, purring at her friend's sappy expression.

Gingerfur nodded. "I know..." She paused, suddenly serious. "You've thought about what I said, right?"

Robinear nodded. "Yeah." *I've thought and come to no conclusions,* she added silently.

"Good," mewed Gingerfur, turning toward the river. She sighed. "I...I have to go now."

As she watched her friend cross the tree bridge, Robinear felt suddenly alone.

Hello! Ember here with your weekly chapter! I really hope you enjoyed!

Leopardpaw is me with my clumsiness, ngl xD

So , what do you think of the chapter in general? Of Leopardpaw? Any theories?

Oh yeah, and you can find the rules for that fanart competition on FloraClanCharacters now! The chapter outlining it on Blossom has been deleted to make reading smoother and without interruptions (I also deleted my A/N near the beginning of the book)

In other news, I've written a prologue to the book, so go check

it out!

Dedicated to WarriorCatMoon335 for editing this for me! :)

The Lesser Leader

Robinear woke up to a feeling of unsettlement.

At first, she couldn't remember what was wrong.

Then she remembered.

It had been three more moons.

Robinear groaned and settled back down on her moss, only to have Thrushnose peer over to her with concern. "Are you alright?" she asked.

Robinear shook her head glumly. "No."

Thrushnose blinked once and waited for an explanation.

Sighing, Robinear sat up. "Willowpaw becomes a full member today," she mewed.

Thrushnose's fur bushed up. "He does? Well he better keep away from you, that foxdunged--"

"Shhh! He *is* a Lesser Leader!"

Thrushnose rolled her eyes but begrudgingly shut up.

Robinear glanced around the den. Everything seemed so...normal. It seemed odd, *wrong*, that the rest of the Clan would go about their days as usual when Willowpaw became a full member. But of course, *they* weren't the ones who would be forced into a temporary claim.

I wish that I could pretend that this day was like any other cat's promotion...but I can't. I can't.

Maybe he's nicer than I think he is...?

Leopardpaw sat up, stretching. "Good morning, Robinear, Thrushnose!"

Thrushnose purred. "Hi, Leopardpaw! Ready for your ceremony?" She'd become a lot nicer to Leopardpaw ever since Robinear had told her about what Leopardpaw had said, late *that* night.

Leopardpaw's tail shot up. "Oh! Right! I forgot!" He purred. "I passed my assessment!"

Kestrelwing nodded. "I'm proud of you, Leopardpaw. You did very well!"

Leopardpaw puffed out his golden chest. "I did, didn't I?" He then proceeded to try to strut out of the den. He nearly fell flat on his face, and Thrushnose and Robinear exploded into purrs of laughter.

Leopardpaw ducked his head. "Oops."

Bearpaw yawned and poked his head up. "Leopardpaw? It's our ceremony today, right?"

Robinear turned to face Bearpaw, a hint of surprise covering her features. She'd practically forgotten about Bearpaw, if she was honest with herself. The russet tom barely interacted with her, and Leopardpaw never really spoke about him either.

She was more concerned with his brother.

Leopardpaw nodded. "Of course it is!" He purred happily and ducked out of the door, Bearpaw on his heels. "C'mon, let's hunt!"

Robinear could hear Bearpaw's huff of annoyance. "I'm *not* a Hunter, Leopardpaw..."

The silver tabby couldn't believe that it had really been three moons, it'd barely seemed like a couple of days. But that was what dread did, she supposed. Made things go faster.

Leopardpaw purred. "Well, come guard me, then!"

Bearpaw sighed. "Fine..." Robinear heard their pawsteps retreating,

and she turned to look at Thrushnose.

The beautiful white she-cat was holding back purrs of laughter. "I can't believe they're even related," she snorted. "Bearpaw is so serious, and Leopardpaw's...not."

A purr escaped Robinear's throat, though it died quickly. Thrushnose laid her tail on Robinear's back. "Are you alright?" she asked in concern.

Robinear sighed. "As well as I can, considering the circumstances." She dropped her gaze to her paws for a moment before looking back up at Thrushnonse. "Are we on hunting duty today?"

Thrushnose snorted. "You expect *me* to know?"

"True," purred Robinear. "Hey, Kestrelwing?" she called. "Are we on hunting duty?"

Kestrelwing flicked her tail. "I believe so," she mewed, the paused, thinking. "Wait, I think only you are, Thrushnose."

Robinear straightened suddenly. "Can I go with her?"

Kestrelwing purred and winked. "Of course!"

They exited the den, walked across the camp, and were in the woods quickly, and that was when Robinear finally, utterly broke down.

She couldn't handle it, she really couldn't. She knew EXACTLY what was going to happen when Willowpaw became a full member, and she knew nothing could stop it. Leopardpaw wouldn't dare mess with his brother, and she was just doomed.

I'm doomed, she repeated.

She was going to have to be with him, whether she liked it or not.

It was horrible, was what it was, but it was the way of living in FloraClan. It had been, ever since the sickness that had killed off so many kits.

Robinear curled up, tail over her eyes, and shook. Her mind was racing like a hare, and she barely registered Thrushnose laying down beside her.

"It's ok, Robinear," she murmured. "I know this isn't great, but...I promise, if you end up having..." She curled her lip, "...*his* kits, I will love them like they are ours."

Robinear turned to stare at her... *Clanmate*? *Mate*? warmly. No words needed to be said to convey how much that meant to her, and Thrushnose patted her gently with her tail.

"I love you, Robinear," the white-furred she-cat murmured.

Somehow, those four words infused Robinear with more warmth, courage and strength than she thought her weak, frail body contained. She stood up and leaned against Thrushnose and purred. "Let's hunt, then, shall we?"

Thrushnose nodded. "Of course," she answered. "Fishing?"

Robinear dipped her head in assent. "Sure," she mewed, then paused. "I love you too."

~----------~

It wasn't long before they had to return.

Somehow, Thrushnose's confession had boosted her confidence and endurance, and the silver tabby had managed to catch three fish.

Now, though, her apprehension was returning.

"All cats old enough to serve meet under the Great Tree!"

The fear and dread was making her paws feel like they weighed more than a boulder, and she struggled to approach the tree. Her heart dropped as she was Willowpaw looking smug near the rock, and Leopardpaw looked both excited and worried at once. Bearpaw looked unconcered.

"FloraClan gathers here today to witness the ascension of ranks of

three cats from trainees to full members. Bearpaw, step forward," mewed Oakbranch.

Bearpaw did so, his posture somehow both submissive and intimidating.

For a moment, Bearpaw's russet pelt shifted to a light brown under her gaze. Tankit had been like that once...always eager to impress, eager to fight...

If only I had that strength...

For all her bravado earlier against Willowpaw, the silver tabby knew that when he truly approached her, she'd submit. Without protest.

I am a coward.

Cedarbranch stepped forward and placed his paw on Bearpaw's head, reciting the words of the ceremony. "Oh, Sun and Moon, the givers of light and life, look down upon me to approve my choice. Bearpaw, you have proved an excellent contributor to the Den of Hunters and Warriors. Your excellent pinning and dodging skills are held in the highest regard by every member of FloraClan. Starlingclaw, is your trainee Bearpaw prepared to take on the role of a full member of the Den of Hunters and Warriors?"

Starlingclaw flicked her tail and nodded. "He is, Leader of the Trees," she mewed. She sounded confident, but Robinpaw was certain she heard a slight waver in her tone.

She heard it in every voice when they spoke to their superiors.

"Then by the power granted to me by my position, I give you your name. Bearpaw, from this moment on, your name shall be Bearfang, in honor of your sharp reflexes and the quick thinking like a fox. The Den of Hunters and Warriors welcomes you as a full member."

The newly named Bearfang stepped back next to his siblings, his tail swaying slightly from side to side in excitement.

"Leopardpaw, step forward."

Some part of Robinear was relieved that it wasn't Willowpaw called forward, even though the rational part argued that it was simply delaying the inevitable. The suspense almost made is worse...though she still somehow wished that Willowpaw's name would never be called.

Oakbranch leapt down from his place on the tree and placed his paw on Leopardpaw's head, reciting the now-familiar words of the ceremony: "Oh, Sun and Moon, the givers of light and life, look down upon me to approve my choice. Leopardpaw, you have proved an excellent contributor to the Den of Hunters and Warriors. Your stalking and balance skills are held in the highest regard by every member of FloraClan. Kestrelwing, is your trainee Leopardpaw prepared to take on the role of a full member of the Den of Hunters and Warriors?"

Kestrelwing nodded, though there was a flicker of nervousness in her eyes. "He is, Leader of the Trees."

"Then by the power granted to me by my position, I give you your name. Leopardpaw, from this moment on, your name shall be Leopardtail, in honor of your superb balance and hunting of the mouse. The Den of Hunters and Warriors welcomes you as a full member."

Leopardtail straightened almost imperceptibly as he walked back to his spot next to his siblings. He looked radiant, happy.

Robinear felt proud.

But now...

"Willowpaw, step forward."

Robinear's blood turned to ice. This was it. The moment she'd been dreading.

She felt a warmth suddenly on her shoulder as Thurshnose leaned against it. *She's just as worried as I am...*

"Oh, Sun and Moon, the givers of light and life, look down upon me to approve my choice. Willowpaw, you have proved an excellent

contributor to the Den of Lesser Leaders. Your excellent proposal and endorsement skills are held in the highest regard by every member of FloraClan. Rowantwig, is your trainee Willowpaw prepared to take on the role of a full member of the Den of Lesser Leaders?"

Rowantwig nodded firmly. "He is ready, Leader of the Trees."

Robinear's breath stilled for a moment. She knew what was coming next.

"Then by the power granted to me by my position, I give you your name. Willowpaw, from this moment on, your name shall be Willowtwig. The Den of Lesser Leaders welcomes you as a full member."

Willowtwig stepped back to stand next to his brothers, his posture straight and expression haughty.

And then the cheering started, FloraClan cheering on its newest full members.

Robinear cheered for her denmates, but no one else.

Whew! Ember here with this very emotion-filled chapter! And I'm sorry that I'm a week late now...hopefully the next chapter will be out on Sunday.

So! What did you all think of the chapter? About Robinear and Thrushnose FINALLY admitting they liked each other? About Willowtwig and his sibling's promotions?

And any theories you'd like to put out here? xD

As always, hope you all enjoyed this chapter!

~Ember

PS: The results for the art competition are out! Go look at the Fanart book on FloraClanCharacters to see the results!

The Claiming

Three days passes since Willowtwig had become a full member.

It was strange, truly strange, that he hadn't approached her. Maybe he'd forgotten about her. Maybe, just maybe, he didn't really want her.

Maybe some other she-cat had caught his eye.

Robinear shifted uneasily in her nest, accidentally brushing Thrushnose with her tail. The white she-cat blinked her eyes open and glanced at Robinear in confusion. "What is it?"

Robinear sighed. "Nothing." *Yet,* she added.

Despite her hope, the silver tabby just *couldn't* believe that Willowtwig would just ignore her. So instead of relaxing, her nerves were just more on edge than ever.

Thrushnose exhaled loudly, her breath ruffling Robinear's fur slightly. "Nothing from Willowtwig?"

Robinear shook her head.

Thrushnose sighed again, her tail moving to rest on Robinear. She didn't seem to know what to say.

Who would, if their mate was going to be stolen away by a tom they hated?

Robinear let her tail rest gently on Thrushnose's, who purred quietly in response. Not long after, the white hunter was asleep, her chest rising and falling evenly.

But Robinear couldn't sleep.

It was strange-- though her sleep had been erotic ever since

Willowtwig's ceremony, she'd always, eventually, been able to sleep.

But something just felt...different about tonight.

A cool breeze blew gently into the entrance of the den, and Robinear's whiskers twitched in discomfort.

Why me?

Suddenly, the sounds of footsteps approaching caused her head to snap up. She didn't even care if anyone knew she was awake as her eyes scanned the den for the culprit.

It was Leopardtail.

A sudden surge of hope shot through her. Perhaps Willowtwig *wouldn't* claim her after all!

The golden tom stood their awkwardly, his tail swishing from side to side. "Robinear..." he began. His gaze dropped to his paws. "I'm here with something and a message from my brother," he sighed. Something landed gently on her shoulder, and Robinear blinked at it.

It was a flower.

"He told me to give you this." A pause. "And wear it."

By the darkness, if he really though she'd accept ANY gift from him...

Robinear stood up slowly, taking care not to wake Thrusnose beside her. Despite her secret mate's good intentions, any interference on her part would just make the situation worse.

They'd probably die.

Leopardtail sighed. "He...wants you to meet him by the pond."

The pond.

The pond...

Robinear dipped her head. "I'll go," she mewed softly. She was a coward after all-- her only act of defiance would be to leave the flower.

Leopardtail looked both relieved and saddened, his eyes suddenly looking guilty.

She suddenly tilted her head and stared at Leopardtail. "Did he threaten you?" she inquired.

Leopardtail blinked. "How did you--" He sighed. "Yes, he did." His mew quavered a moment. "He-he can kill me, and no one will ever blame him..."

Oh, poor Leopardtail.

"I'm sorry," she mewed.

"I wouldn't do it of my own free will, I swear," he blurted out.

Of course he wouldn't. Leopardtail is one of the only cats I can trust in this Clan...

"I'd...better get going, then," Robinear murmured.

Leopardtail nodded shakily. "I suppose." He looked one toward his new nest, and reluctantly settled down there.

Robinear ducked out of the den. *No use delaying the inevitable.*

"Wait," called Leopardtail quietly.

Robinear stopped.

"I'm sorry," he mewed. He paused. "I'd recomment taking the flower with you..."

"It's ok," she replied, her mew wavering slightly. "But no, I won't. It's all I can do to defy him..."

Leopardtail's expression looked horribly guilty, and Robinear felt a surge of pity for the golden tom. *Leopardtail...you're the last cat to*

blame for this.

And with one last glance at the shaking Leopardtail and the slumbering Thrushnose, Robinear slipped out to confront Willowtwig.

~----------~

Robinear's paws seemed impossibly heavy as she followed the river to the pond.

Maybe it'll be ok...maybe he'll be nice...maybe he just wants to talk...maybe...

But Robinear knew it was all a lie-- she was just trying to convince herself.

An owl hooted somewhere in the distance, and Robinear nearly leapt out of her fur. Her fur spiked instinctively before she could stop it, and her heart hammered loudly in her throat.

I'm scared, she whimpered quietly to herself. *Sun and Moon help me.*

The splashing of the water was all she could think of as her body seemed to shut down, and her body no longer seemed to be in control. She was shaking-- oh, she couldn't stop shaking-- but the night was warm.

All that kept her going was the memory of Thrushnose's face.

He'll kill her if I don't come, she reminded herself. *All he needs to say is that we're in a forbidden relationship, and...*

Mud and Silverfur's execution came to mind, and she shook violently.

She nearly stopped as the water slowed to a gurgle before splashing into the pond, her paws only continuing onto the rocks with severe force of will.

"You came." Willowtwig's mew was almost enough to make her run, but she resisted. *Stay strong,* she reminded herself.

"I did," she mewed. She made no attempt to hide her anger, her extreme fury and terror at being dragged out of her den for this. She was certain Willowtwig could feel the contempt rolling off her in waves.

He leapt down neatly from the rock he had been sitting on, walking over to her and sitting down comfortably. His gaze raked up and down her body, and Robinear didn't conceal the shiver that stole through her.

"You don't have my flower," he observed, his mew darkening.

"I didn't want it," she retorted. "It came from you."

Willowtwig looked genuinely offended. "Sorry that I tried to be sweet...?"

Robinear snorted. *He's so clueless.* "I don't like you, Willowtwig. One flower isn't going to change that"

His expression fell for half a moment, before he replied, "But I like you." He stepped closer, so close his fur almost brushed with hers.

Robinear shivered again.

"I'd like to initiate a temporary claim on you," he murmured, padding around her slowly.

Robinear gulped. "And if I say no?"

"The question is just a formality," he mewed. "But I won't hurt you, Robinear."

"Promise?" breathed out Robinear. It was a stupid question...it wouldn't change what would happen, but she asked it anyway.

Willowtwig hesitated. "Well, I'm not sure..." He paused. "But the question is simply politeness, my dear."

His *dear? By the darkness, no. I will* never *belong to the piece of foxdung.*

A flash of defiance shot through her. She *wouldn't* let this tom intimidate her, simply walk over her.

"N-" began Robinear, but Willowtwig whipped in front of her and pressed a claw to her neck.

"What was that?" he hissed.

Robinear couldn't speak, and his claw dug deeper into her flesh.

A flash of pain shot through her, and drop of blood dripped out slowly. Robinear's breath caught. "Y-yes," she choked out.

"Better," he muttered, lifting his claw off her neck.

Robinear stood still and silent as he stared at her once more.

He purred, leaning in close to breathe into her ear. "You're mine."

~----------~

Robinear vomited up the vole she ate, shivering violently.

Thrushnose was instantly at her side, her nose wrinkling slight at the scent but her worry all on Robinear's well-being. "Are you alright?" she asked quickly.

Robinear shook her head. "I've been feeling sick all day," she admitted.

Thrushose's fur spiked. "We need to get you to a Healer."

Robinear almost protested-- she knew exactly what was wrong with her. Paired with the fact that it had been a moon since...that, and that she had been feeling tired, there was no question.

She'd told Thrushnose this would happen.

But that stubborn she-cat, bless her, didn't want to believe it.

"Come on," she hissed, yellow eyes flashing with concern and worry. "We have to get you to the Healer's Den...Moonblaze!" she called suddenly.

The black she-cat poked her head out. "Yes?" she called curiously, before noting Robinear's sick and exhausted expression. Moonblaze instantly shot out of the den, looking with concern at Robinear's form.

"By the Sun and Moon, you don't look good," she mewed in worry, struggling to lift the light grey she-cat gently by the scruff. "Thrushnose, get her other side!"

The two she-cats pressed on Robinear's sides, supporting her. Thrushnose grunted with effort. "How much have you eaten?" Thrushnose complained.

Oh, Thrushnose...don't you understand?

The three stumbled into the den, and Robinear collapsed, panting, on the moss.

Thrushnose instantly tried to make Robinear more comfortable as Moonblaze felt her body carefully, searching for the damage. "What happened?" she asked.

Robinear felt too tired to respond, so Thrushnose spoke for her. "She just threw up what she ate! I don't know what's wrong!"

Moonblaze's paws froze over Robinear's belly, and she looked down at the she-cat, sympathy in her eyes. "You've been feeling tired lately, too," she mewed.

It wasn't a question, but Robinear felt the urge to nod in assent.

Moonblaze opened her mouth to make the announcement, then sighed. "You know, don't you?"

Robinear nodded.

"Well, I don't," hissed Thrushnose in annoyance. "What in the name of the Sun and Moon is wrong with her?"

Moonblaze dropped her gaze. "She's expecting."

Aaand I bet you weren't expecting a chapter so soon, were

you? Can you believe it, though? We're so close to the end!

Dedicated to wolfdragon225 for making my day today :) And special t hanks to RavenFeather_TC for editing this for me :)

please don't kill me for this btw

Anyway what were your general thoughts on this chapter? Reactions? What do you think of the fact that Robinear's pregnant?

Comment here if you want Willlowtwig dead

Until next Saturday!

muffled evil laughter in background

~Ember

The Vigil

The death of two of the Leaders came suddenly.

Really, it shouldn't have surprised her. Marigoldflower had been old as long as Robinear could remember, and Ashbranch had always winced when jumping on and off the great tree.

But their deaths, occurring only moments apart, were still huge shocks to the Clan.

"Oh Leaders of the Trees and Flowers, may your spirits rise and rest in the embrace of the Leader," mewed Moonblaze, head bowed in respect.

"May you rest in peace," repeated the Clan. They were in a circle around the two bodies, and Robinear sat near the back. Her belly was ridiculously huge now, and a kit inside gave a violent kick.

Robinear shifted uncomfortably, her tail sweeping the ground with annoyance. The dirt blew up in Oakbranch's face. She shot him an apologetic glance and he glared at her, but didn't speak. It was a ceremony, after all.

That'll be a problem later, she sighed.

"May your memories live on in all our hearts, and may the Lesser Leaders select worthy replacements," continued the Healer. "Lesser Leaders, do you swear to select worthy members to replace the fallen Leaders?"

"We shall," mewed the Lesser Leaders in unison.

"The three Elder Leaders of the Trees, please name your candidates," mewed Moonblaze. "Pinebranch, please start."

Robinear blinked. She'd never attended a Leader's death before, but apparently the new Leader selection happened awfully fast.

The oldest of the living Leaders, Pinebranch, stepped forward. "Birchtwig," he mewed without hesitation.

There were murmurs of approval from the Clan-- Birchtwig was a senior member of the Lesser Leaders and had had two apprentices.

Moonblaze nodded her head. "Birchtwig?"

Birchtwig stepped forward. "I accept the nomination."

The black-furred Healer nodded her head. "Good. Maplebranch?"

The light brown tom raised his voice. "Aldertwig," he called.

There were mutters of surprise from the Clan-- Aldertwig was a fairly young choice, but perhaps that was what the Clan needed.

"I accept the nomination," mewed Aldertwig.

Finally, Moonblaze turned to the second-youngest Leader. "Oakbranch?"

Oakbranch stepped forward, opened his mouth, then frowned at Birchtwig. Clearly, he'd been his choice as well. "Willowtwig."

No!

Willowtwig dipped his head. "I accept the nomination."

Now the murmurs of surprise were more outspoken. Willowtwig was *very* young, and quite arrogant as well. Surely no one in their right minds would elect *him* Leader.

Of course, Robinear wasn't completely convinced that FloraClan was sane.

Now, Moonblaze turned to the female Leaders. "The three Elder Leaders of the Flowers, please name your candidates," mewed Moonblaze. "Poppyflower, please start."

The ginger she-cat stepped forward, then mewed her choice without hesitation. "Irisblossom."

Her sister?

Irisblossom seemed nearly as shocked as she did. "I-I accept the nomination," she called, her voice shaking.

Moonblaze dipped her head to Roseflower, inviting her to speak.

"Tulipblossom," she mewed, looking regretfully at Irisblossom.

Tulipblossom dipped her head. "I accept the nomination."

"Daisyflower?"

"Dandelionblossom," replied Daisyflower.

Moonblaze nodded. "Now, Lesser Leaders, cast your votes in the Den. May your choices be made before the presence of the deceased. The rest of you are dismissed."

Robinear sighed and sat down, not wanting to move until the Leaders were announced. She mused over the ceremony. It was strange having the Healer run the ceremony, but she supposed it made sense...

Not many cats, in fact, had actually left their spots. Only a couple cats had left, but the Lesser Leaders had all entered their den to vote, leaving the clearing strangely empty.

Thrushnose walked over to her, and Robinear's demeanor brightened. She sat next to the silver tabby, fur brushing. "So, my brother and your sister nominated," she mewed. "Who would've thought?"

Robinear nodded. "Yeah...I don't think they'll be chosen, though."

Thrushnose blinked. "Why not?"

"They're too young," Robinear pointed out. "There are others more experienced than them there."

Thrushnose nodded. "True. But you'd be surprised. I remember Lilyflower's selection, and she was awfully young. Probably younger

than Irisblossom, even." She paused, purring. "After all, they don't want their new Leaders dying of old age!"

Robinear purred as well, leaning slightly into Thrushnose's sturdy form. She jolted suddenly as she felt another kick.

"Oh!" cried Thrushnose. "Was that a kick?"

Robinear nodded, purring. "Yes. The little ones are quite lively today."

She wrinkled her nose suddenly in thought. *Wait...it's been two and a half moons...*

Could it be...?

Another kick came, and Robinear winced. "Not so hard, little ones," she muttered.

Suddenly, the Leaders burst out of the Lesser Leaders den. "All cats old enough to serve meet under the Great Tree!" called Roseflower

Robinear looked toward the Great Tree, deciding that she was close enough. She was feeling quite tired now, and felt very comfortable where she was.

The few cats that had scurried off after the vigil hurried back and seated themselves under the tree. The Lesser Leaders filed out of the den, quite a few looking quite disappointed at the results.

"The Den of Lesser Leaders have selected two cats as replacements for the fallen Marigoldflower and Ashbranch. Irisblossom and Willowtwig, step forward."

Robinear's breath caught, and she was struck with a mixture of terror and pride. Her sister had become Leader, but Willowtwig had as well...

"Irisblossom, do you swear to uphold the laws of FloraClan, no matter who it is who disobeys it?" The four Leaders of Flower's voices rang in unison, and Robinear was struck with a sense of awe at their power.

"I do," replied Irisblossom, voice strong.

"Do you swear to never let your emotions get in the way of your duty?"

"I do." Less certain this time.

"Do you swear to keep FloraClan strong and lead it through times of trouble?"

"I do."

"Then, Irisblossom, take your place on the Great Tree as Irisflower, Leader of the Flowers. May your days be long, and your leadership be great."

Irisflower leapt up on the tree, nearly toppling off before she sunk her claws in. She looked down on FloraClan, her eyes shining.

Now Willowtwig stepped forward, eyes shining. "Willowtwig, do you swear to uphold the laws of FloraClan, no matter who it is who disobeys it?" The four Leaders of Tree's voices rose above the mutters of some of the Lesser Leaders, who evidently hadn't voted in favor of the white tom.

"I do," replied Willowtwig, voice strong.

"Do you swear to never let your emotions get in the way of your duty?"

"I do." Robinear could have sworn he glanced her way, and she was certain she felt the kits shiver.

"Do you swear to keep FloraClan strong and lead it through times of trouble?"

"I do."

"Then, Willowtwig, take your place on the Great Tree as Willowbranch, Leader of the Trees. May your days be long, and your leadership be great."

Willowtwig leapt up to his branch without hesitation, and the cries of congratulation of FloraClan rang out. He made eye contact with Robinear and nodded almost mockingly.

At that moment, a feeling of blinding pain shot through her body.

A cry of pain escaped her lips, which was nearly lost in the chaos of the cheering, but Thrushnose was at her side instantly. "Robinear! Robinear! What's wrong?"

What do you think? she wanted to snap, but another spasm of pain wracked through her body.

"Moonblaze!" Thrushnose screeched in panic.

"Meeting dismissed!" called someone frantically, and Moonblaze was suddenly at her side.

Robinear's mind was in too much pain to register the fact that she was moving, or notice anything but the searing pain and the bodies of Moonblaze and Thrushnose supporting her. She cried out again, feeling her body collapse gently on the moss.

A stick was shoved toward her, and Robinear bit down on it hard as she could to muffle her screams. She felt something sliding out of her, and heard Moonblaze snap something to her trainee.

"You're doing well," Moonblaze purred.

Robinear couldn't do anything but bite the stick again.

Suddenly, she felt something give again and she collapsed, the pain leaving her.

Moonblaze purred, shoving two newborn kits toward the exhausted mother. "Meet your kits, one tom, one she-cat."

Thrushnose purred. "Yellowkit and Whitekit."

A feeling of warmth came through Robinear as she gazed at the white tom-cat and yellow she-cat, who squirmed toward her, their eyes still sealed shut.

Even if they're half Willowbranch's, they're all mine.

Even if I didn't want them, I love them with all my heart.

Hello! This chapter is early! Maybe this book will be done ahead of schedule! How does that sound?

Special thanks to for editing this chapter for me!

So, this was a very action-filled chapter! What do you feel about Irisflower's new Leadership position? Willowbranch's?

And what do you think of the fact that Robinear has little kittens?

Anyway, I hope you liked this! This book is actually almost done! Three more chapter!

~Ember

P.S.: There's now an account called WillowtwigHateClub...I died laughing when I found it, ngl. Love you guys!

The Kits

Robinear woke to a kit tripping over her tail.

She blinked her eyes open, her gaze falling on Brownkit, who dipped her head and looked away. She, her sister Greykit, and her brother Mottledkit were all Quailwhisker's kits, and they were *almost* as adorable as her own.

Almost.

As if on cue, Yellowkit yelped something happily and raced toward her, nearly tripping over her own tail in the process.

"Mama! Thrushnose is here!" chirped Yellowkit, tumbling over her mother. "Mama, wake up!"

"I'm awake," Robinear purred, standing up and gently shaking Yellowkit off. "Now, where's your brother?"

"Over there!" mewed Yellowkit, pointing with her tail toward the entrance. Sure enough, Whitekit stood there, quietly speaking with Thrushnose.

Robinear squeezed her way through the nursery, taking care not to step on any of the kits. With her two kits, Gingerfur's four, and Quailwhisker's three, one could barely move without stepping on a kit. Thankfully, Gingerfur's were almost old enough to start testing, but still...five kittens and two full grown cats was quite a lot.

"Thrushnose!" she called, a warmth filling her heart. She ducked out of the entrance and nuzzled Thrushnose happily. "How'd you get out here?"

Thrushnose purred. "Well, I maybe went hunting on this side of the river," she mewed, gesturing at the three mice behind her. "And then I got...distracted by my friend in the nursery." She purred. "And Owltalon came as well."

The brown tabby waved his tail from beside Thrushnose, and Robinear blinked in embarrassment. She'd been so excited about seeing Thrushnose that she hadn't even seen Owltalon there.

"Quailwhisker!" Owltalon called.

"Owltalon?" came the excited reply. The tortoiseshell picked her way carefully across the den before burying her nose in Owltalon's fur. "You rascal! You haven't come and helped me *at all!* These three are a lot of work!"

Owltalon purred. "Exactly why I left them to you, dear."

"Hey!"

Robinear suddenly felt a tiny pair of teeth latch onto her tail, and she lifted it so and plopped the offender in front of her. Yellowkit blinked at her innocently, and Robinear huffed in mock exasperation. "Yellowkit!"

"What?" mewed the tiny she-cat. She suddenly turned and saw Thrushnose. "Mama!"

"Shhhh!" hissed Robinear frantically, glancing to Quailwhisker and Owltalon. They both nodded in assurance that they wouldn't tell, and Robinear's shoulders sagged in relief.

Thrushnose purred. "Hello, Yellowkit!" she mewed. The little kitten poked at Thrushnose's tail curiously, sneezing loudly when her head was practically covered the the fluff of the tail. Thrushnose purred again and withdrew her tail. Yellowkit chased after the fluffy, white tail, leaping at it, but Thrushnose kept it just out of her reach.

A paw prodded Robinear's leg hesitantly, and Robinear looked down to see Whitekit looking up at her. "What is it, little one?" she asked.

Whitekit looked up shyly. "Is Thrushnose our mama too?"

Robinear's heart nearly burst with love for her kits. "Yes," she mewed. "But don't tell."

Whitekit nodded solemnly. "I won't," he mewed. He padded over to Thrushnose and buried himself in her fur. With his white fur and yellow eyes, he could've been a copy of Thrushnose.

Of course, Robinear knew who he really was a copy of.

Willowbranch.

Thrushnose's tail suddenly wrapped around Robinear's own. A flicker of warmth shot through her, and she felt truly at peace.

That peace, of course, was almost instantly broken by Yellowkit tackling Whitekit, who yelped a protest and began tussling.

Orangekit poked his head out of the nursery curiously, then darted out when he saw the commotion. "Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!" He was quickly joined by his sister Blackkit, though she seemed more amused than anything.

Gingerfur, sighing, guided them back toward the den with her tail. "*No*, Orangekit, Blackkit."

"Awwww," Orangekit complained. "But it's *exciting*!"

Blackkit snorted. "And hilarious."

Gingerfur sighed again and herded them back in with her tail, shooting Robinear a pitying glance.

"And it won't be happening much longer," muttered Robinear, bending down and prying Yellowkit off his brother. "Yellowkit, you know better than this!" she scolded.

Yellowkit blinked innocently. "But it's *fun*!"

"And good training for when we're Testees," added Whitekit, shaking the dirt out of his pelt.

Thrushnose shook her head in mock disapproval. "And to think I thought you were the sensible, rule-abiding one..."

Whitekit stuck out his tongue at her and ducked into the nursery.

Yellowkit shook free of her mother's grip and bolted after him.

Testing...

I forgot.

Sure, it wasn't *that* soon, but the fact that Whitekit already knew about it caused a shaft of worry to flash through her. Tankit had been in the back of her mind for moons, but this one sentence brought him to the front again.

A limp body on the sand of the Battle Testing Arena, blood turning it red...

Robinear forcefully shoved the memory back to the den in her mind where it belonged. She refused to succumb to it. She couldn't let it get to her.

Taking deep breaths to steady her, Robinear still couldn't get the idea of Testing out of her mind. Yellowkit dove and Whitekit, who dodged and ran straight into Quailwhisker. The tortoiseshell broke away from Owltalon and hissed in annoyance, shooing him him off with a flick of her tail.

Yellowkit pounced on him and pinned him, purring with amusement.

"Help!" yelped Whitekit. "I'm being attacked by a vicious rogue!"

Mottledkit shot over, hissing at Yellowkit. "What are you doing on FloraClan territory?"

Yellowkit purred. "I'm going to destroy FloraClan!"

"No!" gasped Brownkit, joining in. She threw a fake swipe at Yellowkit, who gave a yelp of pain so realistic Robinear briefly worried that she'd actually been hurt.

"Ahh! You have wounded me!" mewed Yellowkit dramatically, falling over and sticking her tongue out.

"Haha! We've defeated the rogue!" yowled Brownkit triumphantly.

Whitekit quickly got up and prodded Yellowkit cautiously. Yellowkit's tail flew up, smacked him across the face, and then fell limp. Whitekit sneezed loudly and backed away. "Hey! Dead cats don't move!"

Yellowkit purred and stuck out her tongue at her brother, who huffed haughtily and turned away.

Blackkit suddenly hurried over, hackles raised in a mock battle stance. "Not so fast, Clan scum! You killed my friend! Prepare to die!"

Another scuffle broke out, Yellowkit magically coming back to life to join the chaos. Eventually, all nine kits were engaged in a mock battle, though half of them seemed to be constantly switching sides.

Gingerfur padded carefully around the kits and joined Robinear and Thrushnose. "Lively, aren't they?" she purred.

Robinear nodded. "And adorable," she agreed. Even though she'd never wanted to have kits, the sight of them almost made her forgive their father.

Almost.

Watching Yellowkit try to tackle Whitekit, Robinear felt a surge of warmth surge through her. Her kits' friendship reminded her so much of hers and Tankit's...

Tankit.

Suddenly, a fear she hadn't even considered came through her. She'd had a sibling *die* in Testing, and nothing seemed to have been done to improve the security. And it wasn't a one-time thing, either, as Quailwhisker also had a dead sibling...

What if her kits...

Surely nothing will happen to them...

Of course nothing would.

They had a Leader for a father.

Her tensed muscles relaxed slightly-- as the offspring of a Leader, they'd probably be treated quite well. No one would want to risk the wrath of an angry, Leader father.

But the others...

Robinear glanced over to one corner of the battle, when Gingerfur's kits tussled. Orangekit, Goldkit, Blackkit, and Silverkit-- and awful lot for one cat to manage. Robinear felt a surge of admiration for Gingerfur. She had enough trouble with her two, but four...she couldn't even imagine.

I wonder if one of them *will die...*

And image of a kit, laying unmoving, came to her mind once more. The other three watched the kit die, horror carved in their expressions.

No....NO....

The colors started to shift to the pelt coloring of her siblings, but Robinear shoved the memory back angrily.

NO! I will not let it win!

Shivering, Robinear tried to banish the thought of Testing from her mind, but to no avail.

Thrushnose leaned over and draped her tail over Robinear's back. "What is it?" she asked, worried.

Robinear exhaled. "Testing," she mewed simply. Her mew trembled slightly, and she winced at the sound.

You're weak, weak, weak, weak...

Thrushnose sighed in sympathy and twined her tail with Robinear's. "I'm sorry," she mewed. She paused, then asked, "It's Tankit, right?"

Robinear nodded mutely, fighting hard to keep the memory at bay.

"I miss him," she whispered. "I really miss him." A series of choking noises escaped her, her grief spilling out to the one cat she trusted- Thrushnose.

She'd never truly *grieved* for Tankit. She'd focused on forgetting him, on getting through life.

But sometimes, you have to take time to grieve.

A noise of sympathy escaped Thrushnose's throat, and she pulled Robinear close. "I'm sorry," she mewed in her ear, her breath ruffling Robinear's fur. "I'm so sorry. Just remember...I'll always be here for you."

There, in Thrushnose's embrace, Robinear felt truly safe.

Who's excited for the conclusion of this book? I'm actually considering finishing it all the weekend! (Why? Because I can. ;))

So, who are your favorite new characters here? I hope you found the kits adorable <3 and I hope you also enjoyed the RobinThrush moment!

Dedicated to DuskyKat for editing the chapter, and constantly promoting it (despite my protests) for me :)

~Ember

The Story

My kits, thought Robinear, *are the best gift the Sun and Moon have given me.*

Yellowkit and Whitekit lay at her side, slumbering peacefully. The moon's rays shone into the den, framing Yellowkit's peaceful form, and all seemed happy. The den was quiet and roomier as well, Gingerfur's kits having begun Testing.

All in all, it was wonderful.

The sound of pawsteps outside the nursery caused Robinear's ears to perk up in curiosity. She turned her head slightly to see the entrance.

A small grey cat poked his head in, and Robinear stood up slowly, careful not to touch her slumbering kits. "Greyfur?" she asked. In her time living in the nursery, she'd perfected the art of speaking in barely a whisper.

Greyfur's eyes nodded, gesturing outside with his tail.

Robinear blinked and padded out of the den. "What is it?" she asked curiously.

Greyfur glanced around cautiously. "Can you keep a secret?" he breathed.

Robinear nodded, curious. "Of course! You're my brother, Greyfur." She tilted her head slightly to the side. What could he be so cautious about?

Greyfur swallowed. "I've...I've joined the rebellion."

A jolt of fear shot through Robinear, and she backed away from her brother. Had he brought her here to kill her? To kill her kits?

Greyfur's expression fell. "No! I don't want to hurt you!" he assured her. "I just wanted to ask...would you like to join as well?"

Robinear shook her head. "No, no. I'm happy here. I have two kits, Thrushnose, and friends...I don't have a death wish."

Her brother sighed. "But don't you want to fight back against the cats who killed our brother? Who let Willowbranch take you without batting an eye?"

Robinear blinked, a bit of hesitation entering her tone. "N-no. I'm fine."

"Fine," sighed Greyfur. "Just...just don't turn me in, right?"

Robinear nodded. "I promise."

Greyfur's tense muscles relaxed slightly. "Thanks, Robinear." He began to turn away before pausing. "If you change your mind, though..."

Robinear shook her head. *I won't,* she thought, but with a bit of doubt.

"...then you can meet us in the Great Field."

The Great Field...

Robinear's mind flashed back to the rogue she'd met in the woods, the one she'd been convinced would kill her. "Do...do you know a she-cat named Primrose?" she asked hesitantly.

Greyfur spun around, surprised, and nodded. "What about her?"

"I met her in the woods," Robinear admitted.

Greyfur tipped his head, interested. "Hm, interesting."

Robinear waited for him to continue, but he said nothing more. "I guess I'll see you later," she mewed.

Greyfur nodded. "Until then," he mewed, crossing the tree-bridge

quickly.

Sighing, Robinear curled back up in her den, her slumbering kits beside her, and feel asleep, her mind still whirling with the conversation she'd just had.

~----------~

That day, Sunpaw came to recite the legends.

It was a common event, something that happened every quarter-moon. It kept Yellowkit and Whitekit quiet and entertained and let Robinear rest, something she was eternally grateful for.

Unfortunately, the story and rules today weren't ones that were nice for her to listen to.

The small grey Healer Trainee wrapped his tail around his paws and began speaking. "Come, future of FloraClan," he mewed. "Come and here the words of those from long before us. Come here the stories of long ago. Come and hear the rules that keep us together. Listen, young ones, and take these lessons to heart."

Yellowkit darted over almost instantly to sit as close as she could to Sunpaw, her eyes shining with excitement. Whitekit padded over a little slower, but just as eagerly. Quailwhisker's kits joined as well, their tails swishing in excitement. It would be their last day in the nursery.

Sunpaw sat up a bit straighter. "Today, young ones, I tell the story of how the claiming rules came to be."

Instantly, an image of Willowbranch shot through her mind, and she winced. Her kits, on the other hand, cheered in excitement and leaned forward.

They don't know what this really means...

Robinear blinked, suddenly realizing something. *They don't even know they have a father...*

The Trainee Healer began his story, his words eerily similar to the

ones told to her, so many moons ago, in her own kithood.

"Once, when FloraClan was young and small, there were no claiming rules," began Sunpaw, voice clear and rich. "But one day, a terrible disease swept through the Clan, killing almost all of the kits."

As he spoke, Robinear suddenly saw her darling kits drop dead, and shivered violently. Quailwhisker looked just as disturbed, and reached out her tail to Robinear in comfort.

"So, to prevent the Clan from dying out, FloraClan established rules."

Whitekit tipped his head curiously. "What were they?" he asked the Healer Trainee.

Sunpaw dipped his head. "All in good time, young one," he mewed before continuing. "For the first time, FloraClan opened voting for all cats to decide how to save the Clan. The vote was almost unanimous-- any she-cat without a mate could be claimed for two moons, or until she became pregnant, by any tom. This would ensure a lot of kits, and would make sure FloraClan lived on. Cats in love, however, could institute a permanent claim to prevent this."

Yellowkit's tail swished energetically on the ground. "That's a good idea!" she mewed brightly.

Sunpaw purred. "I'm glad you think so."

No...Yellowkit, it's NOT a good idea...

Yellowkit, however, spoke up again. "But isn't the icky sickness gone?"

The young cat nodded, confused. "Yes..?"

"So then why are the rules still there?"

Sunpaw froze, his mouth open, and looked curiously down at the small yellow she-cat. She blinked innocently up at him as he tried to form an answer.

Robinear's heart stopped-- a question like that, a challenge of FloraClan's authority could easily get you killed.

Yellowkit...stop talking!

Sunpaw, however had an answer ready quickly. "Well, we don't know when the sickness will come back, do we?" he mewed. "We need to be ready."

Robinear knew very well that that was a blatant lie. They'd just never bothered to get rid of it-- the rule benefited the Male Leaders and didn't affect the Female Leaders, so no one saw fit to change them.

And look where that got me...stuck with Willowbranch.

Robinear's gaze found her kits. *But maybe...maybe it's not all that bad?*

Sunpaw quickly purred and concluded his story. "Remember the story, young ones, as long as you live, and remember why the rules are in place." He ducked out of the den as fast as he could, paws thudding loudly.

With the young Healer Trainee gone, the kits immediately darted outside to play something. Sighing, Robinear padded over to the entrance to watch them.

She suddenly felt Quailwhisker sit down beside her. The tortoiseshell queen sighed and glanced at Yellowkit, who was attacking a piece of moss. "You'll have to be careful with that one," she mewed.

Robinear blinked. "Whatever for?"

Quailwhisker looked at her incredulously. "It's up to you to teach them what to say and what not to in this Clan. And you know what Yellowkit is saying now is sure to get her killed in the future."

Robinear winced at Quailwhisker's harsh words, but knew she spoke the truth. "You're right," she sighed. "I'll teach her not to do that." After all, she didn't want her darling daughter to be hurt.

Yellowkit suddenly leapt on her brother, yelling, "DIE, Clan scum!"

Robinear winced. "Yeah, I'll *definitely* talk to her." She turned to Quailwhisker, eyes questioning "Should I teach them the greetings?"

Quailnose nodded. "That would probably be a good idea. I should've taught mine that," she mewed regretfully.

Robinear opened her mouth to call them back in before pausing and turning to her companion. "Thank you," she mewed with sincerity. "I hadn't noticed..."

"We're all blind to our own kits' faults," snorted Quailwhisker. "It's fine. Hey, Mottledkit!" she suddenly yelled. "Get off your brother!"

"You aren't," purred Robinear, before her tone turned serious again. "Honestly, I don't know how I'll make it up to you."

Quailwhisker flicked her tail. "I don't need anything," she mewed, before shifting her gaze to her kits and lowering her voice so low Robinear could barely hear it. "I don't want any kit dead."

Suddenly, her greatest wish suddenly manifested itself in her head. She hadn't truly realized that her wants were, honestly, simple.

I just want my kits to live.

That, Robinear prayed, wasn't too much to ask.

Here it is...the second to last chapter of Blossom...

It's so close!

So, what did you think about this chapter? How about the origin of the claiming rules? What do you think about this book in general?

Thanks to YearlyAquariAce for editing this chapter for me!

Oh, and I might be sending a letter to the Erins to ask permission for this to be published...

cough

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this chapter :)

The Yellow Blood

Robinear sat in silence in the den, her heart pounding hard. It was the first day of her kits' Testing, and she was terrified. Terrified for their present, terrified for their future, and terrified about what would happen to her sweet kittens in the dreaded Battle Testing.

Battle Testing--the birthplace of all her nightmares.

Quailwhisker ran her tail along her flank to calm her. "It'll be alright, Robinear. Nothing will happen."

"Really?"

Quailwhisker exhaled. "No. I can't promise you anything." She paused. "But we can hope." She sat down and began cleaning her pelt.

Robinear suddenly realized she was shaking. "How can you be so calm? Knowing that they've to faced it-- are STILL facing it." She gestured to the other side of the camp, where her kits were undoubtedly training. For the first day of Testing, the two litters were kept separate.

"Because I'm used to it," admitted Quailwhisker. "After watching them fight before, I'm just...immune to it, I guess."

Robinear sighed. *At least Quailwhisker has a loving mate...unlike mine, who took me without permission.*

The only good he's ever done is give me the kittens.

She turned to stare at the kits in question- the white tom and yellow she-cat. Her heart seemed to fill with joy as she saw Yellowkit's excited wriggling and Whitekit's forced stillness. They were the most adorable kits in the world, and forced or not, she loved them with all her heart.

And now they might die. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to banish the thought. *No, no, they'll be fine.*

She began to stand up, ready to go groom their unruly fur, but was gently forced down by Quailwhisker. "No signs of affection," she mewed softly. "It's actually better the less attached to them you feel."

Less attached? thought Robinear incredulously. *Quailwhisker knows that I love every scrap of fur on their bodies.* Outwardly, though, Robinear nodded her silver head, then forced herself to relax as she watched the two leaders-- her kits' new Testers-- enter the den.

She barely suppressed a hiss as she identified the Leaders that were to Test her kits-- her old Tester, Lilyflower, and the kits' own father, Willowbranch. The tom's gaze swept across the den, not stopping to linger on Robinear or her companion. She again suppressed a hiss.

How dare he enter this den and look over her, as it she had not borne his kittens? How dare he treat her like he would treat others of inferior rank?

Quailwhisker's tail ran down her flank again, smoothing her spiked fur. "Relax," she mewed softly.

Right. Robinear smoothed her fur and looked anywhere but the tom who had fathered her kits.

Lilyflower looked down at the six-moon-old kittens. "Yellowkit, Whitekit. You have reached six moons of age, and it is time for you to begin your Testing. The Testing determines--"

"Your future rank and destiny! We know. Mama taught us." Yellowkit bounced excitedly, looking up at the Leader. Willowbranch flashed Lilyflower a quick glance.

Lilyflower's cold gaze snapped toward Robinear, and she had a sudden urge to sink into the dirt floor of the den.

"That is correct," mewed Lilyflower coldly, her voice loud and commanding. "No more interruptions, is that understood?"

The two kits nodded, terrified.

"Now, as I was saying, the Testing is an important part of your life. When your Testing is complete, the Naming ceremony will take place and you will receive your true prefix. I'm sure that you know that your current prefix is your main pelt color, correct?"

Whitekit nodded, glancing at his littermate. Robinear knew that he was hoping she wouldn't make a sound, but--

"Yep!" mewed Yellowkit brightly, beginning to bounce with excitement again. Robinear fought the urge to tell her kit to stop talking as the yellow she-cat was again fixed with Lilyflower's icy glare. Yellowkit stopped bouncing.

"Well, your true prefix determined by your rank. Flowers or trees for a Lesser Leader, animals for Hunters and Warriors, and just your same colour prefix for Servants. Is that understood?"

The two kits nodded again.

"Good. Now, Whitekit, you and Willowbranch will go to the tree, where he will teach you some basic fighting moves."

Whitekit nodded and jumped up, following his Tester to the aforementioned tree.

Lilyflower turned to Yellowkit. "And you, Yellowkit, will come with me."

Robinear discreetly nodded at Yellowkit, urging her to say the response that she had taught her. "Yes, Leader of the..." Robinear nodded encouragingly "...Lilies?"

Oh no.

Robinear winced as Lilyflower lashed out at Yellowkit; her side suddenly had a gash in it, blood running down. "You will address me as Leader of the Flowers. Is that understood?"

Yellowkit nodded mutely.

"Good. Now follow me."

Yellowkit followed the light grey she-cat out of the den, still trembling, and was led to the rock on the opposite side of the clearing. Robinear sank back into the moss, terror in her eyes.

"What if something happens to Yellowkit?" she wondered anxiously. "She interrupted, said the greeting wrong-- what if..?"

Quailwhisker sighed. "Even if something does happen, there's nothing we can do about it."

Robinear nodded. "I know. I just worry..."

"Whitekit! Yellowkit! It is time for Battle Training!" Willowbranch's call came from the arena.

Already? Robinear padded forward nervously and peered out. *They can't have learned much in this short of time.* She breathed out a sigh of relief. *So they'll be fine.*

The two kits walked swiftly towards the circle drawn in the dirt. They paused and looked at each other inquisitively. Lilyflower impatiently walked over and had them stand straight, then walked back next to Willowbranch.

Willowbranch stepped forward. "First and only round, Whitekit against Yellowkit!"

The two kittens stepped hesitantly into the circle, then backed as far away as possible from each other. "Ready...FIGHT!"

The two kits raced toward each other, Yellowkit leaping up and landing on her brother, hissing. He managed to claw her flank, and Yellowkit began scratching him up all over until he flipped her over.

Claw. Hiss. Jump. Slice. Spin. Roll. Kick.

Yellowkit managed to get back up on top of her brother, and raised her paw and prepared to deliver the final blow-- the blow that would knock her brother unconscious.

Suddenly time seemed to slow down, and the colors of the siblings' pelt's shifted- the yellow to a tan and the white to a brown, and Robinear knew exactly what was going to happen.

Her cry of anguish muffled by Quailwhisker's tail, Robinear's muscles tensed, ready to jump in and stop the insanity. *I don't want to let this happen again...like poor Tankit.*

No signs of affection... Quailwhisker's instructions suddenly flashed through her mind.

Robinear hesitated, giving Quailwhisker a chance to pin her down. Helpless, the silver queen could do nothing but watch as Whitekit spun around and sank his teeth into Yellowkit's neck.

Spitting Quailwhisker's tail out of her mouth and somehow dislodging her hold, Robinear raced toward her kits. "No! Yellowkit!"

Whitekit released his grip on Yellowkit and turned to face his mother, confused. Yellowkit fell with a thump on the ground, blood forming a pool beneath her and her breaths coming in shallower and shallower.

Forgetting her fear of blood for once, Robinear let out a cry of anguish and raced toward the ring. Reaching it, she started to race towards the limp kit on the ground when suddenly there were several cats pinning her down.

"No, little queen," mewed Willowbranch from on top of her. "No interfering."

Quailwhisker nodded, trying to send her a silent message with her eyes. J*ust cooperate.*

"But don't you care?" she screeched at Willowbranch, ignoring Quailwhisker's warning. "She's your daughter too!"

Willowbranch shrugged indifferently. "I'm sure that I can have plenty more daughters, and an insolent one does not deserve to live."

Robinear let out a yowl of fury and tried desperately to reach Yellowkit. *My poor daughter.*

"Mama?" asked Whitekit, tilting his head and displaying his bloodied teeth. His fur seemed to shift to brown and back again. "Why are you yowling?"

"You killed Yellowkit!" she shrieked, her anger heightened by the sight of her poor daughter's blood on his teeth. "Don't you understand? She's dead!"

"What does dead mean?" Whitekit cocked his head curiously at her, looking from his bleeding sister to his squirming mother.

Robinear stopped struggling for a moment. *He doesn't even know what he did. It's not his fault, it's Willowbranch's.*

She struggled to turn her head up toward Willowbranch. "You taught him this! You killed my-- no, OUR daughter."

"Oh, she's not dead," mewed Willowbranch calmly, climbing off of Robinear and padding casually towards Yellowkit. He poked her side with an unsheathed claw, and then calmly sheathed it. She cried out in pain and began shaking. "Your son still needs to perfect his killing bite. He just learned it today, after all. However-" He loomed over the shaking kit and purred, unsheathing his claws again. "-I can arrange her death."

"NO!" yowled Robinear. "I'll do anything!"

"Anything?"

Robinear nodded, inwardly cursing herself. *I'm going to regret this.* She looked back at her daughter. *But it's for Yellowkit...*

"Even be my mate again, and refuse my brother's claim?" There was a hint of a triumphant snarl in Willowbranch's tone, as if he knew she would agree.

And he's right. Without truly pausing to consider the question, Robinear yowled her answer. "Yes!"

"Good," purred Willowbranch. "Lilyflower?"

WIthout a word, Lilyflower leapt off Robinear, her shock keeping her in place for a moment. The light grey leader stepped towards Yellowkit and neatly sliced her throat.

"No!" yowled Robinear, shaking Quailwhisker off and launching herself toward her daughter, frantically trying to stop the blood.

"She's dead," mewed Willowbranch flatly. "It's no use."

Lilyflower purred and began slowly licking her claws clean, one at a time.

Willowbranch eyed Robinear, success and twisted pride shining in his eyes.

"B-but...you broke your promise!" Her claws unsheathed, wishing she was strong enough to strike, to draw blood.

"No, I didn't," mewed Willowbranch smugly. "I said that I wouldn't kill the kit." He glanced at Lilyflower. "Not that she wouldn't."

Lilyflower continued calmly licking the blood off her claws. Robinear suddenly realized her former Tester was doing it slowly just to make her angrier. *Well, it certainly is working!* she thought with a hiss.

Robinear suddenly considered Willowbranch's claim, her heart sinking as she realized that was true. "But...Yellowkit..."

Willowbranch purred. "Oh well. One less insolent kit, and one more cat that has learned its lesson."

Robinear collapsed next to the body of Yellowkit, yowling her pain to the stars. *First Tankit, and now my poor daughter...* Seeming to know what she was thinking, Lilyflower purred and displayed one still-bloody claw to Robinear. "Just like Tankit. I'm sorry that I wasn't the one to deal the final blow." Knowing that she had triggered the queen's worst memory, she padded away to the river.

Tankit...poor Tankit. Robinear shut her eyes in misery.

Willowbranch turned to the remaining kit. "Testing's over for today," he mewed, turning to walk back toward the Leader's den with Lilyflower.

Robinear lifted her head up towards them to voice her last hope. "I'll tell the Clan about this!"

Both Leaders paused and turned to each other, amused. "Oh, Robinear, do you not think that this happens with every litter?" purred Lilyflower.

"What?" Did she just say that every litter had a dead kitten?

"Oh yes. Ever since this she-cat's been leader," replied Willowbranch. He paused next to her and eyed her menacingly. "And remember, I'll be waiting," he purred quietly. He turned back towards Whitekit. "Go on."

The white kitten nodded and walked back toward the nursery, stopping to look at his mother. He shrugged, leaving Robinear standing over his littermate.

She looked down at the broken body beneath her, rage blossoming in her grief-torn body. *Yellowkit...I will avenge your death. And I know that the Leaders are the ones responsible.*

An image of Greyfur's offer appeared in her mind, and she turned her head to where she knew the Great Field lay.

Her claws unsheathed and sank into the earth.

Trust me, Yellowkit. Your father and my sister will pay.

I'm barely even going to put an author note here...I know you all want to murder me right now...

Btw, if any of you have been long-time followers, you might notice this is an adapted version of a contest entry I wrote in...August of 2016.

The story continues in Book Two: Bloom! The prologue and description should be out shortly.

Also, the FloraClan RP is also being released, so that's something to look forward to.

~Ember

Published!!

Guys, guys, Blossom is now published!! (quiet squeal)

It's available on Amazon as an ebook at just $3.99!

Here's the link (also on my profile): https://www.amazon.com/gp/aw/d/B073RSNZ8G/ref=mp_s_a_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1499398292&sr=8-1&pi=AC_SX236_SY340_QL65&keywo+Larson&dpPl=1&dpID=51CGz6NW8jL&ref=plSrch

Wait, wait, I can hear exactly what you're all thinking right now. *Well, that's good for her n' all, but why would I pay $3.99 for a book I've already read?*

Excellent question! And here's your answer.

The published version differs from this Wattpad version in a couple important ways, and I will list then off here...

1. RobinThrush is better developed

2. Leopard's character is better developed

3. Willow's motives make more sense

4. Three additional chapters and an epilogue!

5. No grammar errors!

6. Seasons are consistent

7. Better paragraphing and fixing of other errors and plotholes

And if all of that isn't enough to convince you to buy this book, please consider that I am an aspiring author, and this is the first book I've ever published!

I also do apologize that the last 20 chapters of my book on wattpad

are private. It's to help prevent plagiarism. I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but I hope you understand :)

And last but not least, if any of you were worrying about copyright and stuff, let me assure you, I cannot be sued for this. I don't mention the original Clans or characters from the book, and anything used from the originals (groups of civilized cats, some if the words, etc.) cannot be copyrighted :)

I do understand if you don't buy it...I just ask you to consider it. Thank you all so much for reading my book and sticking with it!

<3 Ember

Limited Time Discount!

Due to the fact that I have reached *350* (!) followers on my account, Blossom will be available *for a week only* at the reduced price of **$2.99**! And even if you happen to have already bought my book, I'd really appreciate a review on Amazon!

[image]

The link to this book's Amazon is on my profile page, and can also be found by going to kathrynkaylarson.com!

Please note: This is still only an e-book and the updated price may take a day or two to load due to Amazon's reviewing process.

THIS SALE ENDS ON NOV. 26, 2017 AT 11:59pm EST

I hope you guys consider supporting me as a new author, but if not I completely understand <3

On a side note, the sequel, Bloom, is almost halfway done! I hope you all are enjoying reading it as much as I am writing it!

Thank you so much for reading this book!

~Ember